

The Role of North East Indian NGOs in Chennai during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Special Focus on the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) and the Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (NCFC)

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Abstract—This paper examines how community-based organizations of Northeast Indians in Chennai responded to the COVID-19 crisis, with a special focus on the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) and the Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (NCFC). During the pandemic, many students and migrant workers from India's Northeast region were stranded or distressed in Chennai due to lockdowns, loss of income, and travel disruptions. Community Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like NEIWAC and NCFC mobilized relief efforts, advocacy, and support networks to assist the North East Indians. This paper analyze their initiatives: organizing food and cash aid, coordinating with state governments and various agencies for transportation, food and raising grievances of discrimination, and providing shelter and information. These organizations exemplify migrants' solidarity and social resilience. In Chennai there are dozens of Northeast-specific NGOs and church fellowships that support migrants and assist them in overcoming obstacles. Through legal advocacy, relief distribution, and government liaison, NEIWAC and NCFC played a crucial role in mitigating the pandemic's impact on the Northeast Indian community in Chennai.

Index Terms—Covid-19 Pandemic, Liaison, Migrants, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Northeast Indians, Tamil Nadu Government

I. INTRODUCTION

Chennai, Tamil Nadu's capital, hosts a large community of migrants from India's Northeastern states. Many youths from Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Sikkim,

and Tripura from India's Northeast regions come to Chennai for education and jobs.

Over the past few years, the migration of North East Indians have increased and many people attracted towards Chennai because the city offers them with variety of job opportunities across various sectors. And their poor economic situation pushes them out of their states in search of opportunities. Since the conduct of census in 2011, there have been various studies that indicate the shift of Northeast migration from the north to the south. Migration from Northeast to Delhi has declined by 26% (Singh & Gandhiok, 2019). There has been significant flow of Northeast migrants to Kerala (Narayana & Venkiteswaran, 2013), Chennai (Banti Deori, 2016; Samuel Douminthang Baite & Xavier, 2020) and Bangalore (Marchang, 2018). South India has experienced fast industrialization, has higher wage rate and a relatively more tolerant community. This has attracted migrants from the Northeast India in recent years.

North East Indians decide to work in Chennai due to many reasons. That includes better infrastructure, improved educational facilities, employment for all levels, good public transportation, and friendly working environment with attractive and lucrative salary. The Northeast Indian migrants have the opportunity to start small businesses in Chennai because they feel that the city is the best place for their survival. Their business includes road side eateries, restaurants, etc. There are many reasons that provoke North East Indians to leave their states. That includes natural calamities like erosion and flood, conflicts over ethnicity, armed forces attack, financial problem

and agricultural issues. As in most of the areas only agriculture is practiced the income level is less and it stimulates the Northeast people to look for a change (Kiruthiga & Magesh, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns (2020–2021), these communities faced acute hardship: many lost jobs or income, could not travel home due to suspended transport, and in some cases were stigmatized as disease carriers (Prabhakar, 2020).

To cope, North East Indian migrants relied heavily on mutual support networks and community organizations. In Chennai, numerous secular and religious NGOs formed by the Northeast migrants looked after their members' needs. For instance, one study notes that "in Chennai, there are seventeen secular NGOs and twenty religious organizations" dedicated to Northeast migrants' welfare (kuey.net)². Among these, the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) and the Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (NCFC) emerged as proactive organisations during the COVID crisis. This paper investigates how NEIWAC and NCFC mobilized aid, transportation and advocacy for the stranded Northeast people in Chennai.

NEIWAC is a pan-North East Indian community association that serves migrants from all eight Northeastern states; NCFC is a church-based fellowship serving the Naga community in Chennai. During the pandemic NEIWAC coordinate with Tamil Nadu and Northeastern state governments, and addressing issues of discrimination, shelter homes, food and other essential materials for the stranded Northeast Indian people in Chennai as well as in other parts of Tamil Nadu. In particular, NCFC coordinated with the Nagaland government for the stranded Nagaland citizens in different parts of Tamil Nadu, it illustrates the vital role of North East Indian NGOs in Chennai's COVID-19 response, and how diaspora networks foster community resilience (Lotha, 2024).

II. NORTHEAST MIGRANTS IN CHENNAI AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The reason for North East Indians' migration to Chennai can be studied under the two factors, the 'push factors' and the 'pull factors'. The push factors that push one out of the region are socio-political unrest in the region, lack of employment and lack of education

facilities. The pull factors to the Chennai are employment opportunities both in government and private sectors, a better environment for study with multiple choices of studies and North East people feel safe in Chennai.

"The phenomenon of migration – be it international or internal migration, North East India is not in an exception. Great number from the region is migrating to other regions and cities due to various factors. Some of the factors of migration from the context of North East India basically are education, livelihood, job opportunities, and better life. Most of the migrants from the region particularly the uneducated or less educated or skilled ones voluntarily leave their place in search of better economic opportunities and work in various companies, building projects, shopping malls and hospitality industries feel safe in Chennai" (Walotemjen, 2018).

The state of Tamil Nadu reported 12.39 million migrants in the 2011 Census, while it was only 3.95 million in the 2001 Census. The State added the highest number of migrants (8.47 million) among all states in India, registering a growth rate of 213.7 percent (Rabiul Ansary, 2011). Since 2014, the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC, 2014) has been addressing various issues faced by North East Indian migrants in Chennai and other parts of Tamil Nadu, often in collaboration with different organizations. For instance, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, NEIWAC assisted in the repatriation of over 25,531 stranded people from the Northeast region who were living in Tamil Nadu, working together with the Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu. It also organized Government Community Shelters to accommodate more than 7,750 homeless individuals from the Northeast, including five dedicated shelter homes supported by the Greater Chennai Corporation. In addition, NEIWAC provided dry rations to over 5,000 Northeast migrants in collaboration with various Chennai-based NGOs and the Tamil Nadu government, particularly for those severely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic (NEIWAC, 2020).

Moreover, when the Aadhaar Card a biometric identification system was introduced in India, NEIWAC took the initiative to facilitate Aadhaar enrolment for the Northeast community in Chennai. As a result, hundreds of people were able to obtain

their Aadhaar Cards locally, without having to travel hundreds of miles back to Northeast India.

The COVID-19 pandemic in India developed due to the global contagion of novel Coronavirus disease-2019 caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). By 27th March 2022, India reported the second highest number (43,019,453) of confirmed Coronavirus cases across the globe and the third highest number (521,004) of deaths due to COVID-19. The first case in India was reported in Thrissur, Kerala on 30th January 2020 in students returning from Wuhan, China. Subsequently, 24th March 2020, witnessed a total of 9 deaths with 519 confirmed cases. Owing to the imminent threat, the government announced a 21-day strict country-wide lockdown on 25th March 2020. Due to the severity of the situation, the National Disaster Management Authority further extended the lockdown to 31st May. Meanwhile, since no standard treatment regime existed against COVID-19, different treatment modalities and preventive measures were tried to manage the condition of infected patients. In light of scientific and epidemiological evidence and less clarity on a treatment regime, vaccination was considered the primary focus and was aggressively pursued.

In January 2021, India approved Oxford–AstraZeneca (Covishield) vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, Pune, and the first indigenous vaccine, BBV152 (Covaxin), developed by the National Institute of Virology, Pune, and manufactured by Bharat Biotech, Hyderabad. On 16th January, almost a year after the first reported case in the country, a massive, free vaccination program was launched through 3,006 centers across the nation with the availability of Covishield or Covaxin, and approximately 165,714 people were vaccinated on the very first day. The positivity rates kept on increasing till 10th June and then onwards recoveries exceeded active cases for the first time. The deadly second wave of COVID-19 hit India in March 2021 and was more catastrophic than the first wave. The issue got compounded by the scarcity of hospital beds, vaccines, oxygen supply, and other medical services across all Indian states. The public health system in India struggles on many fronts. High population density and poor socio-economic conditions in India further added to the struggle against the second wave. There was a sharp rise in the daily confirmed cases rate, surging

from 1.62% on 1st March 2021 to 20% on 31st May 2021. The available resources (oxygen, drugs, ventilators, etc.) got exhausted quickly and hospitals had no isolation wards left, thereby leading to a massive number of casualties. Furthermore, the virus kept on mutating into more evolved strains that had more infectivity (higher reproduction number, R0) and could infect a wide range of age groups.

When India's nationwide lockdown was announced in late March 2020, thousands of migrants from the Northeast became effectively stranded. Train and flight services were suspended, leaving many unable to return home. Chennai being declared a COVID-19 "red zone" exacerbated their plight: institutions closed, daily jobs vanished, and basic supplies became scarce (Morung Express, 2020). Liaison with governments. The Northeast Indian NGOs in Chennai communicated the community's needs to both Tamil Nadu and Northeastern state authorities, enabling government relief. This included compiling lists of stranded individuals and negotiating supplies and shelter with government officials. Community outreach and information-sharing. They used church networks, social media, and street-level volunteers to keep people informed. For example, NCFC's pastor, who also served as a Nagaland government nodal officer in Tamil Nadu (Eastern Mirror, 2020).

III. NORTH EAST INDIA WELFARE ASSOCIATION CHENNAI (NEIWAC)

The North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) is a secular platform for the eight Northeastern states of India. NEIWAC came into being on 21st June 2014 following the recommendation of Bezbaruah Committee for the Northeast concern under the initiative of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India and with the encouragement and support of the Tamil Nadu Government (NEIWAC Voice: Co-Existence Souvenir, 2016).

During the COVID-19 crisis, NEIWAC's leadership and volunteers took on multiple responsibilities. One of NEIWAC's first actions was raising awareness of discrimination. In mid-March 2020, the association filed a formal complaint with the Chennai Police Commissioner, informing that Northeast students and workers were being singled out in public after COVID-19 emerged in China. The Northeast people

are targeted as they resemble Chinese people, leading to harassment and even forced evictions from hostels and rented houses (Times of India, 2020)

NEIWAC reported to the Ministry of Home Affairs Government of India, North East Division on 24th September, 2020, “Over 25,531 persons were sent home to Northeast India through 18 (eighteen) Shramik Special Trains from Chennai. Over 7,750 homeless Northeast people were accommodated in government community shelters in Chennai. Over 5,000 Northeast people were provided with food and dry rations through contributions from five (5) donors, ten (10) NGOs, and the Government of Tamil Nadu.

NEIWAC would like to acknowledge the Central Ministerial Team, led by Shri V. Thiruppugazh, Additional Secretary, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), for inviting NEIWAC to the consultative meeting held at the Tamil Nadu State Guest House on 25th April 2020, and for their visit to the Northeast shelter home at Pallavaram.

NEIWAC also acknowledges the National Commission for Women, all the Northeast State Governments, Southern Railway, the Greater Chennai City Corporation, and the Greater Chennai City Police for their support and cooperation.”

These accounts show NEIWAC enabling a broad coalition of community volunteers. Another aspect of NEIWAC’s work was liaising with authorities. The organization served as the Northeast community’s interface with Tamil Nadu’s government. NEIWAC leaders met Tamil Nadu officials to request support measures. By late May 2020, its appeals had brought results: Tamil Nadu’s administrators arranged for shelter and dry rations for the stranded Northeast Indians across several districts. (Eastern Mirror, 2020).

In Chennai itself, civic authorities set up designated “shelter homes” for Northeast migrants, and NEIWAC helped coordinate residents into these facilities (The Hindu, 2020). Moreover, NEIWAC repeatedly urged the local government to ensure migrant students could remain in their hostels even if they had to fend for themselves in terms of meals. NEIWAC’s interventions ranged from grassroots aid distribution to high-level advocacy during the Covid-19 pandemic in Chennai all the North East Indian migrants come together under the banner of NEIWAC (Prabhakar, 2020).

Overall, NEIWAC’s role during COVID-19 exemplified a multidimensional approach: ensuring survival (food, cash, shelter), protecting rights (anti-discrimination advocacy), and maintaining community cohesion (communication and travel). Northeast NGOs in Chennai “promote resilience” by addressing legal, economic, and social needs in crises. NEIWAC’s pandemic response aligns precisely with this model of community resilience.

IV. NAGA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP CHENNAI (NCFC)

The Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (NCFC) is a church-based organization serving the Naga community in Chennai. It operates as a religious and social fellowship – one of many such groups helping Northeast migrants in Chennai. In practice, NCFC works closely with the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) and state networks. The President / Pastor, who leads NCFC, also serves as the Nagaland government’s nodal Officer for COVID-19 relief in Tamil Nadu. Thus, NCFC occupies a unique bridge between civil society and state machinery (Eastern Mirror, 2020).

Schied and Dodrill said, “Christian organizations are where ministry and not just work takes place. Few people work for the money; most feel called to the work.” These goals are not just practical but are often seen as spiritual ministry, described by Jeavons as, ‘activity and involvement with others that is intended to make God’s presence and God’s love visible and tangible to others’ (Lynn Caudwell, 2012).

The Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (Formerly known as Naga Christian Fellowship Madras) came into inception in the year 1985 on 10th November (NCFC, 2010). The Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai was registered under the section 10 of the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975 (Tamil Nadu Act 27 of 1975) on 16th June 2014.

The Naga people are several indigenous groups native to the Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam of northeastern states of India and northwestern Myanmar. They practice alike cultures, traditions and religions (Verrier Elwin, 1969). The NCFC takes care of the spiritual and social needs of the many North East people in Chennai such as to guide them how to adjust and live in harmony with the people from other faiths

and various cultural and social backgrounds at their work place and educational institutions.

During the pandemic, NCFC's contributions were both practical and organizational. On the practical side, NCFC organized distribution of relief kits and emergency aid to Nagas in Chennai. A 15th June, 2021 Morung Express newspaper report highlights such activity: "Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai distributed ration kits comprising of rice, dal, cooking oil and spices to 22 households of North East in Chennai. These have been given to around 65 needy people from NE...". This on-the-ground relief was mobilized at the grassroots; NCFC members packed and handed out food parcels to those in localities like Adambakkam and Teynampet. Such action supplemented earlier efforts by NEIWAC and others, and specifically targeted Naga households (Morung Express, 2021).

NCFC also played a key coordinating role. Acting as liaison and have submitted detailed lists of stranded Nagaland citizens to Tamil Nadu authorities. For instance, on 29th May, 2020 he presented a petition to the Tamil Nadu State's COVID-19 nodal officers. That petition listed 140 Nagas who were stuck across eight districts, requesting government action for their shelter and rations (Eastern Mirror, 2020). Naga Christian Fellowship efforts were also acknowledged by the Nagaland government. The Nagaland state nodal officer later stated that the government had "tied up with various organisations like The Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai to provide swift follow-up and help to people stranded" (Amlan Jyoti Das, 2020). In other words, NCFC was one of the official migrants' partners in the relief network during Covid-19 lockdown. It had both religious legitimacy and official backing. For example, NCFC was coordinating with NEIWAC and city authorities to provide accommodation for Northeast Indians in various shelter homes during Covid-19 lockdown in Chennai. The NCFC pastor and the Nagaland COVID-19 Nodal Officer in Tamil Nadu, in a special report submitted to the Government of Nagaland on 13 June 2020, stated that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that around 1,700 (one thousand seven hundred) stranded Nagaland citizens were living across nineteen (19) districts of Tamil Nadu, namely Chennai, Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu, Vellore, Krishnagiri, Erode, Coimbatore, Salem, Thanjavur, Namakkal, Pudukkottai, Dindigul, Sivagangai, Tiruchirappalli,

Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Kanyakumari, Kallakurichi, and Tirupattur, who wished to return to their home state of Nagaland.

On 15th May 2020, when the Governments of Nagaland and Tamil Nadu announced the operation of the first Shramik Special Train to Nagaland, scheduled to depart on 19 May 2020 from Chennai to Dimapur, it marked the first Shramik Special train to Nagaland from anywhere in India. Consequently, the Tamil Nadu Government's nodal officers for COVID-19 inter-state movement (in charge of the Northeast region) and the Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (NCFC) initiated a large-scale coordination exercise.

The major steps undertaken included:

- A. Establishing effective official communication with both the Nagaland and Tamil Nadu nodal officers.
- B. Forming a strong coordination team in Chennai comprising leaders from the North East India Welfare Association Chennai (NEIWAC) and NCFC.
- C. Delegating responsibilities among team members, which included:

- i) Personally, contacting stranded Nagaland citizens to confirm travel willingness and residential addresses for arranging bus transport and informing them of pickup points (verification was done using the "I Am Stranded" Government of Nagaland website list and local Chennai records);
- ii) Conducting medical health screening;
- iii) Overseeing transportation arrangements in coordination with Greater Chennai Corporation officials;
- iv) Arranging food and drinking water for passengers while boarding the train;
- v) Setting up a reception team at the railway station entrance to ensure proper arrangements, including issuing tickets only to individuals listed in the official passenger manifest, in support of railway authorities;
- vi) Managing passengers arriving from other districts of Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry;
- vii) Deploying volunteers on the day of departure to manage logistics and crowd control;
- viii) Establishing coordination and consultation with Nagaland representatives in Vellore district;
- ix) Establishing coordination with Nagaland representatives for passengers from Puducherry;
- x) Informing Revenue Department officials to arrange transportation for forty-four (44) Nagaland citizens residing in five (5) different Northeast shelter homes in Chennai to the railway station; and

xi) Designating a single point of contact in Chennai for final official decisions, in consultation with both state governments, to avoid confusion during the entire operation.

When another Shramik Special train was arranged from Bengaluru to Dimapur on 2nd June 2020, NCFC shared its coordination strategy with the Convener and a member of the Naga Task Force Bengaluru, on the advice of the Nagaland nodal officers for South India. Subsequently, when a third Shramik Special train was announced to operate from Thiruvananthapuram to Dimapur on 9th June 2020, catering to stranded Nagaland citizens from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, NCFC was entrusted by the Government of Nagaland with the responsibility of South India coordination. Accordingly, after consultation with the Nagaland nodal officers for South India, NCFC established points of contact with the following Naga organizations:

A. Tamil Nadu – Naga Christian Fellowship Chennai (NCFC)

B. Kerala – Society for Naga Students' Welfare, Kerala

C. Andhra Pradesh – Visakhapatnam Naga Association

D. Telangana – Naga Christian Fellowship Hyderabad

All four-state government nodal officers were coordinated centrally by the Nagaland nodal officers for South India. In Tamil Nadu alone, around three hundred (300) stranded Nagaland citizens from seventeen (17) districts registered for travel on this train. Consequently, boarding arrangements were made at two railway stations, namely Coimbatore and Katpadi (Vellore).

On 13th June 2020, the Shramik Special train operating from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana to Nagaland created history by completing India's longest single train journey of 4,322 km.

Overall, NCFC, in collaboration with government authorities, facilitated the repatriation of nearly 1,700 stranded Nagaland citizens from across Tamil Nadu and Puducherry through two Shramik Special trains.

In addition to transportation logistics, NCFC disseminated information on COVID-19 protocols and relief measures through church announcements and social media platforms. This community-based communication proved vital, as language barriers and physical distance often limited migrants' access to

official information channels. NCFC's faith-based identity fostered trust, morale, and solidarity during the crisis, while simultaneously enabling practical interventions such as food distribution, needs documentation, and coordination with government agencies. Through its church network, NCFC also provided emotional and spiritual support, informed migrants about helplines, and helped maintain community connectedness during periods of isolation. These efforts complemented the work of NEIWAC, with both organizations sharing volunteers and leadership. Together, NCFC and NEIWAC ensured that the material relief, logistical support, and advocacy needs of Northeast migrants in Chennai were effectively addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

V. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed acute challenges to Northeast Indians living in Chennai. In the face of lockdowns, unemployment, and travel barriers, community-led NGOs stepped up as vital first responders. This paper has documented how two such organizations – NEIWAC and NCFC – mobilized relief, advocacy, and support for the Northeast migrants in Chennai and across Tamil Nadu state. They distributed food, cash, arranged transportation and accommodation to hundreds of stranded Northeast Indians, liaised with state governments to secure aid, and fought for migrants' rights in difficult times.

The actions of NEIWAC and NCFC during COVID-19 were part of a broader tapestry of Northeast migrant networks in Chennai. In addition to these two, dozens of community organisations for the people of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura were active in relief work.

In light of this, we draw two broad lessons. First, local Northeast Indian NGOs in Chennai deeply rooted in migrant communities can respond swiftly and effectively in emergencies, acting as bridges between people and government. It will be helpful for the migrant community like Northeast Indians, if the policymakers should recognize and support such organizations in contingency planning. Second, the pandemic has shown that social networks (ethnic and religious) provide critical informal insurance for migrants.

The NEIWAC and NCFC case exemplifies how migrant communities themselves can be drivers of relief and solidarity. By chronicling their COVID-19 efforts, this paper highlights the strengths and strategies of Northeast Indian organizations in Chennai. Their comprehensive response during one of world's most trying periods confirms that even far from home, ethnic communities can organize themselves to meet collective challenges.

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