

# Migration and Upward Mobility: A Life History Study of a Northeastern Informal Worker in Chennai

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## Abstract

Over the past two decades, indigenous youth from Northeast India have increasingly migrated to metropolitan centres such as Delhi and many have also been finding employment in South Indian cities including Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Chennai. These migrants are largely absorbed into informal sectors such as restaurants, shopping malls, security services, and the grooming and hospitality industries. Recently, technological advancements and the expansion of on-demand, platform-based services have further reshaped migration pathways, enabling some workers to move into freelance and gig-based roles outside conventional organisational structures. This paper presents a life-history based case study of a migrant worker from a village in Manipur who relocated to Chennai in search of better economic opportunities. Focusing on a single respondent, the study traces his migration journey and examines how he navigates multiple forms of employment within the urban labour market to enhance his income and pursue upward economic mobility. While improved earnings and living conditions mark a degree of progress, the study demonstrates that precarious work arrangements, income insecurity, and the absence of formal social protections continue to shape his everyday life. This case study also highlights the strategies he adopts to sustain personal dignity and occupational autonomy amid unstable employment conditions. By foregrounding the lived experiences of a migrant worker from Northeast India, this study offers insights into the complex intersections of mobility, precarity, aspiration, and autonomy within India's contemporary urban informal economy.

**Keywords:** Migrant worker, Freelance, Northeast India, Chennai, Gig work

## Background

The global economy has shifted since the late 1980s, from a labour-intensive manufacturing sector to service sector, with most of these services now relying on digital platforms for task assignment, mediation, and delivery. In India and also worldwide, this growing adoption of new technologies and flexible work practices has fuelled the rapid expansion of the gig economy (Mehta, 2023). In India, rural to urban migration provides a steady supply of platform workers for sectors such as care services, food delivery and logistics (Iqubbal, 2021) (Rathi & Tandon, 2021). Tamil Nadu is one of India's most socio-economically progressed states, exhibiting consistent advancement in industrial growth and urbanization (Shanmughasundaram, 2026; Standard, 2025). The state has achieved significant economic growth driven by different sectors such as automobiles, textiles, information technology, services and has made it one of

the top contributors to India's Gross State Domestic Product. Tamil Nadu has achieved a better social and economic advancement over the years and has undergone a distinct demographic transition. The state's population growth rate has declined below the replacement level and its fertility rate has been continuously dropping (Biswas, 2024). As a consequence of this demographic shift and the gradual shrinking of its native working age population, the state has become increasingly dependent on labour inflows from other parts of India to sustain its industrial and service sectors (Janardhanan, 2023). In addition to this the Census-based estimates show that Tamil Nadu recorded a positive net migration rate of 0.66 in Census 2011, in contrast to a negative net migration rate of -0.07 in the 2001 Census. This reversal can be attributed to a shift in migration patterns, wherein international out-migration of Tamil people has been increasingly offset by in-migration from other Indian states, resulting in net migration replacement through interstate migration into Tamil Nadu (Rajan et al., 2017). Migrants from Northeast Indian states to the southern states like Tamil Nadu has grown significantly in recent decades (Rajarathinam & Kiruthiga, 2017). Migrant workers from Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim constitute a substantial share of Tamil Nadu's informal labour force, particularly in the manufacturing, construction, textile and especially in service sector (Lotha, 2024). Together the population of Northeast constitute 8.3% of the total interstate migrant workers working in Tamil Nadu, according to data accessed from the Tamil Nadu Labour Department dated January 29, 2025. There is an urgent need to research on the experiences of Northeast Indian migrant workers outside the traditional organisational structure to better understand both the opportunities and challenges they face in this line of work. This paper is one such attempt to enhance the existing literature in labour economics, alternative employment structures and migrant experience (Altenried M. , 2022) (Raval & Lalvani, 2022) (Surie & Sharma, 2019).

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

Mostly the research on gig economy is centered around the contexts of western countries like Europe, United Kingdom and America where economic, cultural and legal contexts differ substantially from those found in developing countries such as India (Sharma & Sharma, 2025). Online based platforms in low and middle income countries are increasingly viewed as a driving force that fosters employment growth and poverty reduction especially for the migrants (Foundation, 2013) (Programme, 2016) (Bank, 2016). The recent primary data collected for the doctoral study thesis on the "Issues and challenges of interstate migrant labourers in the unorganised sector of Tamil Nadu" revealed one exceptional case of a freelance worker whose earnings and living conditions are substantially better than those of others respondents employed informally under various establishment. Examining such cases is essential for understanding the social, economic and personal factors that lead to higher earnings and improved living standards, so that they may serve as examples for other migrant workers from Northeast India who aspire to achieve greater upward mobility. Considering the knowledge gap this study tries to fill this vacuum to some extent by studying the lived experiences of a migrant worker in Chennai.

## Objectives

- To analyse the overall work experiences of the respondent in Chennai.
- To understand the role of social network in shaping work and living experiences in Chennai.

## METHODOLOGY

This case study tries to record the narrative of a respondent by adopting a life history approach within the qualitative research design. According to Watson, A life history should be understood as a subjective document through which individuals organize, interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences, shaped by personal aspirations and social expectations (Watson, 1976). The sample has been selected based on purposive sampling under non-probability sampling focusing on one particular migrant worker from Northeast India. To investigate the lived experiences of the migrant gig worker an in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews have been conducted with the respondent twice dated on 04/11/2025 and 09/12/2025 to obtain a chronological account of the respondent's migration journey from his hometown to the present time in Chennai. The interviews were conducted in English for the convenience of respondents and later transcribed the audio into English for further research. Each interview lasted 30–35 minutes and were conducted in person. The purpose of life history work is to illuminate the experiences of marginalised individuals by documenting lives that are often overlooked or devalued. In doing so, it restores dignity and broadens the social narrative to incorporate voices typically excluded, while also bridging the divide between lived experiences and scholarly discourse, which they describe as a form of “research intervention” (Goodson & Gill, 2011). The significant limitation and challenge of this research concern the question of representation, as it draws on the testimony of a single Northeast Indian informal migrant worker to discuss experiences of upward economic mobility. However, adopting a reflexive stance, the aim of this study is not to generalize the findings, but to offer an in-depth, contextualized understanding of an individual lived experience. Adding to this, the article also acknowledges the multiplicity and diversity of lived experiences of Northeast migrant workers, shaped by varied spatial, social, and economic contexts across different parts of Chennai, as well as other places and cities in Tamil Nadu across India.

## CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The life history narrative of the migrant gig worker was explored using two interconnected theoretical frameworks lenses namely the Network theory and Precarity Theory. The Network theory posits that Kinship, friendship, and shared community ties formed by former migrants in destination areas, increase the probability of migration. These networks help provide access to employment and necessary backing at the destination (Massey et al., 1993). The Precarity Theory emphasises the structural instabilities such as income instability, lack of rights/benefits and psychological stress (Standing, 2014).

## RE-LIVING THE MOMENT: NARRATING THE LIFE HISTORY OF PAME

For the purpose of this study, the respondent has been assigned the pseudonym “Pame”. During the course of the scholar's doctoral fieldwork, he happened to meet Pame, a 29-year-old man in the Choolaimedu locality of Chennai. The initial interaction gradually developed into a strong rapport, aided by his fluency in both English and Tamil, which made communication easy and open. As the conversation deepened during the interview process, it was identified that Pame earns an average monthly income of over ₹60,000 while working as a gig worker in Chennai. This figure stood in sharp contrast to the typical earnings of many migrant labourers employed informally in Tamil Nadu, whose average monthly income generally ranges between ₹15000 and ₹16000 (Commission, 2025). His relatively higher income level immediately drew attention and sparked further curiosity about the pathways, strategies and working conditions that enabled such economic mobility.

To explore this further, Pame was requested a follow-up meeting for a more detailed discussion about his work trajectory and everyday life. Pame readily agreed, and with exchanged contact details, the interaction over continued over multiple meetings. Despite his demanding work schedule, there were two in-depth interviews that form the basis of this case study.

*“I didn't study much, I study under class 10 only, and I was a jobless, I am not doing anything, sometime I used to help people there (Manipur) and I used to help a little in farm work”*

Pame is one among the many who migrated from northeast Indian states to southern state of Tamil Nadu and started his livelihood. Persistent insurgency, ongoing law and order problems, poor quality of higher education, and limited employment opportunities in the region are key factors driving out migration from Northeast India (Haokip, 2021). Northeast Indian region has remained among the less developed parts of the country due to inadequate infrastructure, limited democratic governance, low productivity, poor access to markets, minimal industrial activity and a slow expansion of modern service sectors. As a result, agriculture continues to be the main source of livelihood for much of the population (Kipgen, 2023). Poor infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and political instability in the Northeastern states have driven people to migrate out of the region. The expansion of employment opportunities under the neoliberal regime has drawn many of them to other parts of country within India (Sitlhou & Punathil, 2023).

Pame originally hails from Katang Village of Tamenglong district of Manipur State. According to the 2011 Census, the village has a population of 413 residents. Pame and his family own a kutchra house in his village with access to basic essential amenities, including an LPG connection, a toilet and electricity. Pame belong to the Zeme tribe, which was historically part of the larger Zeliangrong grouping within the Naga indigenous tribal community. The Zeliangrong conglomerate comprises four tribes namely, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, and Inpui. The term “Zeliangrong,” coined in 1947, is a three-syllable construction derived from the initial syllables of three of its constituent tribes: “Ze” from Zeme, “Liang” from Liangmai, and “Rong” from Rongmei, and was intended to represent a collective identity (Wijunamai, 2024). The Jadonang and Gaidinliu movement aimed to bring the three groups together in a collective struggle against British colonial authority (Longkumer, 2008). Over time, however, these constituent tribes have developed distinct political aspirations. Reflecting this shift, in 2020 the Zeme Naga Council, Rongmei Naga Council and Liangmai Naga Council held a joint press conference to clarify their disassociation from and to delegitimise the Zeliangrong Union as a representative body of the Zeliangrong community (Naresh, 2020). These communities share linguistic and cultural roots within the Tibeto-Burman language family. Members of the Zeme community are also found in neighbouring states such as Nagaland and Assam. Historically, the Zeme people, along with other Tibeto-Burman speaking groups, are understood to have migrated from regions in Southwest or Northwest China into Northeast India through multiple routes, in different phases, and over extended periods (Phaomei, 2019). Migration from this region remains an ongoing process, as people are still moving to distant urban centres like Chennai in search of better livelihood opportunities. At present, Pame resides in a rented house for which he pays a monthly rent of ₹10,000 in Choolaimedu, a locality in Chennai. Choolaimedu locality is known for its substantial concentration of migrants from Northeast India. The area hosts numerous establishments, including restaurants and grocery shops, owned and operated by members of Northeastern communities. Many of the food items sold in these shops are sourced directly from the Northeast region and transported by air, contributing to higher prices compared to locally available produce. This neighbourhood thus serves

both as residential and cultural space, offering migrants access to familiar food practices, social networks and a sense of community within the urban environment.

*“I am a Baptist Christian, as a Christian always we praise is a good thing like do not harm people and to take care of peoples and always be good to the people, like so in every church or in every corner we go we will preach like that”*

Beyond his work life, Pame identifies himself as a Baptist Christian and emphasized the central role his faith plays in shaping his values and everyday conduct in a large urban environment setting far from his native village. The first Baptist mission entered Zeme villages from Manipur in 1975–76. Earlier, during the 1930s, when the Heraka movement was at its peak, Christianity was viewed by the Zeliangrong people as a colonising influence. With the rise of the Naga national movement led by the Naga National Council (NNC) and the projection of Nagaland as a Christian state, the Heraka movement gradually became marginalised. Over time, the conversion of Zeme communities to Baptist Christianity facilitated closer identification with other predominantly Baptist Naga groups (Longkumer, 2008).

### **Early Life and Journey to Chennai**

Pame has not completed his Class 10 education. During his childhood, he did not have a clearly defined aspiration for the future, although he expressed a strong desire to continue his studies. However, due to the poor financial condition of his family, he was unable to pursue further education and eventually dropped out of school.

*“My friends they want me to come here (Chennai), they were already working here in Chennai, so I saw them. Then felt Okay and decided to come here.”*

Pame migrated to Chennai in 2015 and initially found employment in the restaurant sector, where he worked as a server and was later promoted to an in-charge role overseeing a dessert counter. His salary has increased from ₹7,000 to ₹17,000 over several years. Pame’s migration and work experiences in Chennai, highlight the central role of social networks in shaping migrant livelihoods, consistent with network theory which emphasizes how interpersonal ties reduce risks and facilitate mobility. Pame secured his first employment in the restaurant sector through pre-existing ties with friends from his community, demonstrating how social networks function as key entry points into urban labour markets (Ray, 2024).

*“One of my maternal aunts was working here in hotel spa line, she is working as a manager; she encouraged me to work in this field (Salon)... If you want to grow in your career learn hair dressing, so later on you won’t regret”*

Inspired by the advice from his maternal aunt, Pame decided to transition to the salon and grooming industry, undertaking evening hairdressing training while continuing his restaurant job before fully shifting to the salon sector in 2019. He later joined Toni & Guy as a fresher with a lower starting salary of ₹15,000 than his previous restaurant salary, which quickly rose to ₹21,000 in the same year. Pame’s subsequent transition to the grooming sector, which became an effective turning point in his life under the guidance of his maternal aunt, illustrates the role of community networks in occupational mobility.

### **Navigating Discrimination, Xenophobia and the COVID-19 Crisis as a Migrant Worker in Chennai**

Pame also reported that in Chennai, he occasionally experienced discriminatory behaviour based on his appearance.

*“I used to get discriminated by small kids and drunken people; they used to discriminate us like Chinese and Chinkee. Still, I don't want to fight till now, I don't fight anybody. I used to speak*

*directly in their face that I am not Chinese even sometimes I spoke in Tamil, that time they(local) will stop talking like that”*

The Ministry of Home Affairs has prohibited the use of the term ‘chinkee’ and made it punishable under the SC/ST Act in 2012. However, the majority of people are not aware of such order (Chakma, 2020). Northeast Indian migrants prefer South India over northern cities due to lower levels of discrimination, yet they still face near-daily racial discrimination (Karlsson & Kikon, 2017). Pame’s career progression was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown period, he experienced severe economic and personal hardship in Chennai and eventually returned to his hometown.

*“I was sick with typhoid fever in Urapakkam but not with COVID19, though all the local neighbours were scared, nobody is there to help me... whenever I am coming out neighbours used to run, my cousin was (staying) too far away (Choolaimedu), there was no transportation because of total shutdown. So, one of my community pastor one elder, He only called and messaged in the group like whoever close to him can you please reach out to him... so after this message two guys came to my place and they took me to hospital”*

As the COVID 19 outbreak intensified incidents of racism and prejudice against people of Asian appearance increased in several countries. During this period, the United States President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence publicly referred to COVID 19 as the “Chinese virus” a framing widely criticised for reinforcing xenophobia and intolerance toward Asian communities (Haokip, 2021). Pame’s community network, including the pastor, played an essential role during the COVID-19 period. The community even arranged for him to return to Manipur through a special train when the first relaxation was announced. Pame also described the important role of Northeast Indian community networks in Chennai, highlighting their approach in supporting their members in times of need. Pame’s vulnerabilities during the COVID 19 lockdown, including job loss without compensation, forced reverse migration, and the absence of social safety nets, combined with his physical appearance, which differed from the local population in Chennai, exposed him to additional social and identity based precarity.

### **Livelihood Strategies of the respondent in the Post-Pandemic Period**

After the lockdown restrictions were lifted, Pame returned to Chennai and joined a local salon run by a Tamil owner, where he worked for about a year but left without receiving his final month's payment. He then rejoined Toni & Guy in 2022, working there for nearly two years, during which his monthly income, including incentives and commissions rose to around ₹30,000 due to his growing skills and experience. Pame shifted to Choolaimedu during this time.

*“When I was working in the local salon that owner, he literally he didn’t even pay me my salary, I left the job, I didn’t even take my salary”*

Despite financial gains, Pame faced ongoing workplace issues like uneven client assignments to senior stylists like him, burdened with constant work without breaks. Undeserved scolding from managers which added emotional stress and low morale. Seeking autonomy and dignity, he transitioned to freelance hairstyling for a more peaceful work life.

*“I’m a good stylist in salon. Also, they are very proud of me. My Owner, she likes me so much. She is very good on me because I do a good business like whenever I got client I work very perfectly and satisfy my client well. so, (because of that) they good business. I don’t have problem with my owner but I face problem with my manager”*

The rapid increase in digitization in developing countries has facilitated the penetration of digital work platforms, thereby boosting the growing preference for home-based salon services (Chen, 2016). The

neoliberal state has fostered a system of organised informality that depends on subcontracted, casual, and low-wage labour, while systematically neglecting long-term employment security, formal social protections, and worker welfare (Guha-Khasnobis et al., 2006) (Mirchandani et al., 2016). In metropolitan cities like Chennai after pandemic, many customers increasingly opting for home salon services to avoid traffic congestion, reduce travel expenses and escape long waiting times at physical salons. Home-based services also offer greater convenience, as customers could avail themselves of grooming services during their free hours without the need to adjust their daily routines. Home-based service providers accessed through online apps falls under the on-demand work model within the gig economy, often termed the “platform economy” due to its heavy reliance on digital applications. These platforms facilitate direct interactions between gig workers and customers, primarily through company-developed apps. For workers, gig work offers notable flexibility like the freedom to select preferred job types and platforms, set their own working hours achieve a better work-life balance (Mehta, 2023) (Pichaul & McKeown, 2019).

*“There is no pressure, no tension. So, whenever I want to work, I work. So that point I decided to come to freelancing.”*

Recognizing the advantages of gig work, in the year 2024 Pame decided to join as a service partner (Workers associated with Urban Company are officially referred to as “service partners”) in Urban Company formerly urban clap, an app-based service platform founded in 2014. large venture-capital-backed multinational platform companies use internet and smartphone-based applications to algorithmically organise and control millions of individual service providers by classifying them as “independent contractors (Bank, 2020).” This model enables them to bypass labour regulations that would otherwise require granting workers formal employee status, along with the associated rights and legal protections (Bhatt, 2020) (Stewart & stanford, 2017) (Vallas & Schor, 2020). This platform enabled Pame to access a wider customer base while continuing to work flexibly at earlier stage.

*“First thing is there is not much pressure, the time is a very flexible, whenever I want to take a leave, I want to go somewhere and if I want to go for vacation, I don't have to answer anybody. So now it's all under my control”*

Pame felt happy about the financial mobility he achieved during this time, accompanied by a significant reduction in work-related pressure despite the comparable pay he received for his work.

*“In salon I used to get 30(thousand) maximum in one month, when I come to free lancing, I get 50, 60, 70(thousand), if I am working hard, I get according to my work. So, advantage to me .so for time manageable also it is good.... as a freelance I will get 70, 80, 90(thousand) I used to get sometime per month not every month if I work hard, I would get that money”*

Pame emphasized that in early times the freelancing offers a high degree of flexibility unlike salon-based employment, particularly in terms of time management. This autonomy has given him a strong sense of control over both his professional and personal life in earlier times. In addition to flexibility, Pame noted that freelancing allows him to be more fairly compensated for his skills, effort and the amount of time he works. During particularly busy periods, when he worked intensively and accepted more bookings, his income occasionally reached as high as ₹90,000 per month. He further explained that freelancing not only improved his earnings but also enhanced his motivation to work harder as the financial returns were directly linked to his effort and skill rather than fixed salaries or managerial discretion (Graham et al., 2019).

### Restructuring of Work Autonomy

*“Now a days the urban company also torture us... They are asking me so many questions. Why you're taking leave this day, why you are not working this day like that, they keep on torture, they don't give so much pressure by calling and talking with you now because they control by app itself... If you are not working in the weekends, they will block your ID... I have to work compulsorily 3 weekends in the month, If I don't work in (weekends), then my weekends working hours go down, that time they will block my ID”*

In recent times, Pame alarmed significant changes in the working conditions within the Urban Company platform, which have increased pressure on service partners. compulsory work on weekends, blocking of ID reduces the flexibility that initially attracted him to platform-based freelance work (Gandini, 2019) (Gregory, 2021) (Shipra & Behera, 2020). Platforms often deactivate worker accounts abruptly when even misleading customer complaints arise, leaving workers suddenly without their main source of income (Caza et al., 2022).

*“If they block my ID I need to take a training again. If I continuously take training 3 times, they will completely block my ID, that's also more pressure on us... Early I have to accept the job (now) the(app) automatically accept for us. When I was working before when I joined(Urban company) it was very good for one year, but (now)they control from app itself and giving so much pressure...I can't cancel also, In a month at least 2 or 3 cancel I can do it...if I do more cancel, I have to sit meeting for another 3 days, they block my ID completely until I sit for training”*

Many studies have critically examined the double-edged character of algorithmic management in the gig economy, which offers the promise of higher earnings, flexibility, and autonomy to marginalised workers, while simultaneously subjecting them to levels of insecurity and vulnerability comparable to those found in the broader informal sector (Chaudhary, 2020) (Lata et al., 2023) (Anwar & Graham, 2021). Pame noted that in recent times platform has tightened control over work allocation, automated client assignments that partners must accept regardless of distance or commitments. Cancellations over three times or low ratings trigger suspensions, requiring online retraining to restore access. Their performance is monitored and evaluated through the app itself, which can significantly reduce and sometimes almost remove direct interpersonal interaction from the process of delivering services between the company and worker (Mehta, 2023). Since 2023, Urban Company has been facing growing discontent over issues such as ID blocking, mandatory weekend availability, commissions ranging from 20–40 per cent and threats delivered through app notifications without human accountability and a shift from earlier flexibility to more rigid control. These practices have led partners to organize continuous protests at the company's Gurugram headquarters (Gaur, 2023).

*“I don't fight them (urban company), I just cut the call, so they will not bother me because they know many people join to the urban company and then they left the job because the company now become very worse but I(am) fighting the company and still working, so they know I am working for 2 to 3 years, so they cannot force me”*

Although Pame generally avoids direct confrontation with platform, he sometimes even ignores such calls but the company rarely took strict action against him. According to Pame, this was partly because of his long association with the platform and that many newer labourers had stopped working with the platform due to increasing dissatisfaction, which made the company cautious about penalising experienced partners. In many cities across the globe, migrant workers are indispensable to the operations of on-demand gig economy (Altenried, 2024).

In terms of earnings, Pame explained that Urban Company deducts a commission of approximately 25 per cent from each service booking, with the remaining amount credited to service partners only once every two days rather than immediately. High commissions and the rating system being the primary reasons for income fluctuations (Sharma & Sharma, 2025). In addition, partners are required to purchase all essential hairdressing products at their own expense and these items must be sourced exclusively through the urban company only (Stanford, 2017).

Pame's experience reflects a gradual shift from autonomy driven freelance work to a more tightly regulated form of platform labour. While the Urban Company platform provides significant income opportunities, the increasing surveillance, performance monitoring, and mandatory availability requirements have reshaped Pame's everyday work experience, reintroducing forms of control reminiscent of traditional salaried organisational employment (Moore & Joyce, 2020) (Griesbach et al., 2019). From Pame's words, we can clearly understand how he ultimately realises that "flexibility" promoted as a key advantage of platform work, effectively serves as a lure to transfer risk and insecurity onto labourers (Gooptu, 2013).

### **Personal Client Networks as a coping mechanism against Platform Uncertainty?**

Alongside his work with Urban Company, Pame also engaged in independent freelance activities including makeup for photoshoots, wedding grooming and hairstyling for film related photo sessions outside the platform. In addition to this Pame developed a stable base of repeat clients starting from his earlier years in salon employment. Several customers who appreciated his work began requesting home services directly and over time their personal referrals also have expanded his client network. In addition to that his friends working in salons often refer their own customers to him for home-based services, as they were unable to leave their workplaces during working hours. These referrals have gradually translated into his regular clientele. Collectively, these overlapping networks like platform-based work, personal clients and peer referrals helped strengthen his professional identity and contributed significantly to his income stability and career growth.

*"The problem with my base clients is I won't get order on every day basis, So If I depend on only my base customer it won't be sufficient for me because the base clients will come occasionally only, but in the urban company if I work, I will get work on daily basis as much as I marked my calendar I will get customer"*.

Pame's own client base played a critical role to cope up against the pressures from the app-based platform. This alternative source of clients offered a sense of security and mitigated his dependence on the platform during uncertain periods for a minimum level of income. However, Pame emphasized that relying solely on his base clients was not a sustainable long-term strategy.

Home-service requests from regular clients were Irregular and unpredictable. In contrast, the Urban Company platform provided a more consistent flow of work. Rather than becoming completely powerless, he built a parallel network of his own client base, which placed him in a relatively stronger position to negotiate and contest the platform's control. But Pame was able to navigate precarity by maintaining a base of regular clients alongside his gig work to certain extent only, although his community network plays a vital role in building up this network of clients.

### **Future Plans**

*"I am planning to shift to Nagaland, and then I'm thinking of opening a small saloon and settle there. I will work here for some time. I'm thinking to do the good business over there... only for official"*

*work I will go to Manipur. so mostly I will go to Nagaland state only. My relatives and my friends all are living in Nagaland”*

Pame plans to relocate to Nagaland to open a small salon after saving from his Chennai work, rejecting high-stress overseas jobs like cruise ship hairstyling pursued by friends. He prioritizes a sustainable, low-pressure lifestyle that supports his daily needs comfortably. Pame explained that, as a member of the Naga community, He primarily identifies himself with Nagaland State rather than Manipur state due to its cultural and geographical proximity. He typically travels to Manipur only for official purposes as all his documents are officially registered under Manipur Government. For most social, familial and personal matters he used to visit Nagaland only, where the majority of his relatives and friends also reside. Pame’s plan to establish an independent salon represents a deliberate strategy to move away from dependence on platform-based work, signalling an attempt to regain control over his labour conditions, income, and long-term economic stability. His intention to open the salon in Nagaland, despite being from Manipur, further highlights the significance of community identification and social embeddedness, reflecting the strength of his Naga identity and the supportive role of shared ethnic networks in shaping his future aspirations. Pame’s thinking reflects return aspirations shaped by social capital, identity anchoring, and alternative pathways to economic security.

### **Life in Chennai**

*“I’m thankful for this urban company also because I work here and I got lots of opportunity. I do not have much local friends here. I don’t connect with much people here. But people are good and honest here, for girls the city is very safe, Chennai is very good, I always tell my friends. And the job opportunity is good here”*

Pame claimed that his savings have increased since he migrated to Chennai, which helped him purchase a vehicle for himself. Additionally, he remits more than ₹20,000- ₹30,000 per month to his family back in Manipur and provides greater financial support for the education purpose of his sibling, who is currently studying in Mokokchung district, Nagaland State. After migrating to Chennai, Pame feels more positive changes in his social status with enhanced economic stability and upward mobility in his livelihood. In Chennai, Pame prefers to access healthcare services from private hospitals and feels that he has better access to high-quality healthcare services here in Tamil Nadu than in his native place. Although he does not have many local friends or extensive social connections in Chennai, he spoke positively about the local population. Pame expressed gratitude toward Chennai for providing him with significant opportunities, acknowledging that the city had enabled his professional and personal growth. He described Tamil people as generally honest and remarked that for women the city is relatively safe. While he acknowledged Chennai is much safer compared to other metropolitan cities in India. Furthermore, he noted that the city offers better employment prospects than many other locations, particularly in the service and salon industry. Based on his experience, he frequently encourages his friends from his home region to consider coming to Chennai for work, emphasizing both the professional opportunities and the comparatively safe living environment.

*“Whenever any incident happened, we will put a message in group, If the (victim) don’t have financial (backing), we will contribute small amount from each and everybody... all the money will be put together and we will take care of the treatment. If someone expire, we will book the flight we will send back the (deceased)body back to home... we even used to help those persons who are also not a member... We as a human we extend our help to them also”*

Various forums and associations operate actively in Chennai, ranging from student unions to religious and community-based organizations, formed by migrants from Northeast India. These community network groups play a crucial role in supporting Northeast migrants by providing social networks, cultural continuity and both financial and logistical assistance during times of need (Lotha, 2024).

## Conclusion

This case study examines the livelihood experiences of Pame, an interstate migrant worker in Chennai and highlights the adaptive strategies he adopted while navigating informal and platform-mediated work. Although app-based platforms provided him with relatively consistent access to employment, the growing presence of surveillance, compulsory availability and limited choice over clients gradually reduced their perceived benefits. While Pame initially valued the flexibility of gig work for the sense of autonomy it offered, this flexibility was accompanied by the absence of job security, guaranteed working hours, paid leave, or legal protection, exposing him to sudden income disruptions. Gaps in government support and limited access to social security further heightened his vulnerability, particularly during periods of illness or uncertainty related to platform operations. As a first-time migrant, Pame reported relatively few difficulties in reaching and settling in Chennai, indicating that the city offered accessible entry points into the labour market through existing networks. Overall, this case illustrates both the opportunities and constraints encountered by an individual migrant worker within informal and platform-based employment, shedding light on how autonomy, precarity, and belonging are negotiated in everyday urban work contexts.

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