

# Youth Capability Deprivation in North East India: A Capability Approach Analysis of Employment Constraints

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## Abstract

North East India, despite notable demographic advantages and rising educational attainment, continues to face obstinate employment challenges, particularly among youth. Established regional development strategies often rely on human capital theory, focusing narrowly on vocational training and digital skilling. This review presents that such approaches are inadequate when macroeconomic conditions barricade the effective use of acquired skills. Through the lens of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the condition of unemployment needs to be analysed not as an individual deficiency but as the outcome of structural and institutional deprivation of capabilities. By bringing together socio-economic data and multidisciplinary academic literature, the analysis identifies four interrelated conversion factors that restrict local employment capabilities: weak digital and physical infrastructure, local socio-political conditions that limit investment, social preference for government employment over private or entrepreneurial work and the migration of educated youth to metropolitan centres in search of better opportunities. It is observed that these systemic constraints neutralise accumulated human capital, consequently limiting young people's employability within their native environment. The analysis demonstrates that skill-centric policy frameworks operate in conceptual isolation. Sustainable employment requires a pivot toward holistic capability enhancement, integrating educational initiatives with infrastructural development, accessible micro-finance and institutional stabilisation. True employability in the region depends on creating an enabling environment that grants youth the substantive freedom to transform formal qualifications into dignified, localised livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Capability Approach, Employability, North East India, Youth Unemployment, Systemic Constraints, Human Capital.

## 1. Introduction

The North Eastern region of India presents a distinctive developmental paradox. Despite notable demographic dividends and literacy levels that often exceed the national average, the region continues to encounter persistent challenges in integrating youth into the labour market. Recent assessments of employment trends highlight this disparity. Studies reveal a systemic disconnect between education and labour-market integration, as shown by persistent educated unemployment reported in the 2023-2024 PLFS and the large proportion of youth categorised as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

by the International Labour Organisation [8, 9]. Policy responses to this economic friction have traditionally been grounded in human capital theory. Initiatives such as the Uttar Poorva Transformative Industrialisation Scheme (UNNATI) and regional digitalisation programs emphasise technical training, vocational certification and entrepreneurial development [11, 12]. The underlying assumption is that equipping individuals with market-oriented skills will automatically facilitate labour market absorption. While vocational training remains an important dimension of economic progress, it is observed that skill-centric models alone have not produced proportional reductions in unemployment. A certified skill becomes ineffective when the socio-economic environment does not provide avenues for its meaningful application.

To respond adequately to this disparity, there is a need to transcend the conventional boundaries of human capital theory and adopt a broader conceptual lens. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach serves as an important framework for such an analysis. It views development and well-being not as outcomes of resource possession alone but as the expansion of genuine opportunities and freedoms available to individuals. In relation to labour markets, employability is shaped less by credentials in isolation and more by the range of capabilities that allow individuals to translate skills into meaningful employment [4, 6]. The distinction between human capital and capabilities is critical for interpreting the employment crisis in North East India. A young person may possess technical expertise related to digital entrepreneurship, yet inadequate infrastructure and weak internet connectivity within the region [10] can severely restrict the practical use of those skills. In such circumstances, capability deprivation emerges. In addition, conditions such as compelled migration to metropolitan centres and persistent socio-political instability function as adverse conversion factors that obstruct educated youth from translating their knowledge into stable livelihoods [13, 16]. Employment, therefore, should be interpreted as a structurally conditioned outcome rather than merely an individual accomplishment.

Although extensive literature exists on skill development and migration in India, current discourse disproportionately emphasises human capital acquisition. A critical research gap persists in evaluating how systemic regional constraints in North East India directly contribute to capability deprivation, rendering skill acquisition insufficient for sustainable employability. Existing policy frameworks often isolate variables such as digital infrastructure, ethno-politics or migration, rather than synthesising them into a comprehensive model of capability restriction.

The objectives of this paper are threefold:

1. To analyse youth unemployment in North East India through the theoretical lens of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach.
2. To examine how infrastructural deficits, forced migration and socio-political instability function as systemic barriers to capability realisation.
3. To propose a conceptual shift in regional development policy from skill-centric models to capability-enhancing interventions.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

### **2.1 Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Employability**

The conceptual orientation of this study is informed by the Capability Approach advanced by Amartya Sen. Unlike traditional economic models that equate employability with the accumulation of credentials, training and marketable skills through human capital theory, the Capability Approach adopts a broader

perspective [2]. It stresses the distinction between possessing educational or vocational resources and having the substantive opportunity to transform them into meaningful achievements. In this framework, capabilities are understood as the real freedoms individuals enjoy to pursue valued functioning and life outcomes [1].

In the context of labour-market analysis, sustainable employability is viewed not as a fixed personal trait but as the result of the relationship between individual abilities and supportive structural conditions [6]. Although the acquisition of human capital remains important, it alone cannot guarantee employment outcomes. For socially disadvantaged or geographically marginalised youth, employability must be examined through the lens of conversion factors, including social, institutional and environmental conditions that facilitate or constrain the translation of skills into stable livelihood opportunities [4, 5]. Environmental conversion factors are reflected in the availability of infrastructure and accessibility across geographic spaces, whereas social conversion factors are shaped by cultural norms and ethno-political conditions. Adverse circumstances in these areas limit the substantive opportunities individuals can realistically pursue. Consequently, youth unemployment in North East India is conceptualised less as a matter of low ambition or financial deficiency and more as a condition of systemic capability deprivation [7]. Structural barriers present in the region continue to prevent educated youth from participating productively in the labour market despite possessing academic credentials.

## 2.2 Methodological Approach

A conceptual review methodology has been employed in this study to synthesise secondary data from multiple disciplines in examining structural deprivation, without relying on primary field-based research. The analysis is organised around interpreting the socio-economic conditions of North East India through the framework of the Capability Approach. To strengthen analytical validity, data triangulation is carried out by integrating government reports with peer-reviewed literature from relevant social science and development studies.

The analysis incorporates macro-level employment data, labour-force participation rates and demographic patterns from the Periodic Labour Force Survey of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, supported by youth-oriented datasets from the International Labour Organisation. To provide contextual depth, these statistical findings are examined alongside scholarly literature discussing digital infrastructure disparities, ethno-political environments and socio-economic migration drivers within the region.

In addition, contemporary government policy documents, including skill development initiatives and the UNNATI regional infrastructure scheme, are critically examined through the analytical framework of Amartya Sen's capability metrics. By integrating these varied forms of evidence, the methodology intentionally moves beyond explanations centred solely on individual skill deficiencies. Instead, it enables a structural analysis of the environmental constraints affecting capability realisation and offers a broader understanding of the employability challenges faced by youth in North East India.

## 3. Systemic Constraints on Employability in North East India

### 3.1 Infrastructure Deficits and Digital Education Barriers

Digital integration has become a defining feature of the contemporary economy, with national employment frameworks increasingly emphasising technological competence as essential for workforce participation [11]. Nevertheless, when examined through the Capability Approach, structural fractures become visible in regions such as North East India. Amartya Sen distinguishes between the possession of human capital,

such as digital training or vocational education and the actual capability to utilise those resources effectively [1, 2]. Meaningful participation in the digital economy requires access to stable electricity, internet networks and functional hardware-conditions that remain inadequately developed in much of the region, thereby constraining the practical realisation of acquired skills.

Empirical studies consistently point to pronounced physical and digital disparities between the North-Eastern states and major metropolitan economic centres [10]. Difficult terrain, transportation constraints and uneven infrastructural development have contributed to unreliable or limited digital connectivity beyond urban areas. As a result, policy frameworks that prioritise skill-training programmes without addressing last-mile connectivity create conditions of “skilled unemployment.” Although young people acquire technical competencies, the environmental conversion factors necessary for utilising those skills remain highly restrictive [4, 11].

These infrastructural limitations contribute to capability deprivation even before labour-market entry. Educational institutions located in poorly connected districts often face difficulties incorporating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into teaching practices, resulting in unequal learning outcomes. Consequently, when students enter the workforce, as reflected in the higher unemployment levels documented in the PLFS [8], they encounter structural disadvantages. Employment opportunities linked to remote work, digital enterprise and service-sector occupations remain restricted due to inadequate electricity and unreliable digital connectivity.

Contemporary policy initiatives such as the UNNATI programme have acknowledged the necessity of integrated regional development by encouraging industrial investment and major infrastructure expansion [12]. While these efforts contribute positively toward improving structural conditions, the realisation of individual capabilities continues to be slowed by long-standing developmental deficits. In addition, industrial strategies frequently concentrate on centralised manufacturing zones rather than expanding decentralised digital access, which limits employment opportunities for young people outside urban centres.

Among educated individuals residing in digitally marginalised regions, infrastructural deficiencies create severe limitations on employability by obstructing the conversion of academic credentials into productive economic opportunities. The challenge lies less in the motivation or competence of youth and more in the structural inadequacies of infrastructure as a positive conversion condition [1, 10]. Unless infrastructural disparities are substantially addressed, skill-development programmes may continue producing technically trained individuals who remain unable to participate effectively in the expanding digital economy.

### **3.2 Out-Migration and Structural Capability Deprivation**

In labour economics, spatial mobility is frequently viewed as a beneficial process that enhances career opportunities and improves the distribution of resources. However, when the out-migration of youth from North East India is examined through Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach, it emerges as a structural consequence of localised capability deprivation rather than a purely voluntary choice [1, 16]. Limited access to physical and digital infrastructure functions as a major push factor within the region. Although many young people possess educational qualifications and technical skills, the absence of enabling conversion conditions compels them to migrate toward mainland urban centres in search of employment opportunities [13]. Such migration, therefore, reflects a form of geographic displacement shaped by regional economic constraints rather than an unrestricted exercise of personal agency.

The dynamics shaping migration are multidimensional and cannot be explained solely through conventional push-pull models. Although metropolitan regions attract migrants through wider economic opportunities, youth migration from the North Eastern states is intensified by persistent ethno-political instability [13, 15]. Localised socio-political tensions discourage private-sector investment and interrupt industrial growth, thereby reducing the availability of employment within the region. As a result, migration emerges not merely as an effort to access better opportunities but as a necessary response to enduring structural stagnation [16]. In effect, the region continues to lose its youth population to areas where industrial systems and supportive infrastructure are already more firmly developed.

Relocation to metropolitan regions does not automatically translate into capability expansion. Studies examining migrants from North East India in urban centres such as Bengaluru highlight experiences of prolonged unemployment, skill incompatibility and occupational dissatisfaction [14]. In many cases, the barriers encountered in the home region are substituted by different forms of social constraint, including cultural alienation and challenges of integration within unfamiliar urban environments. As a result, while migration may temporarily reduce economic hardship, it often fails to produce the conditions necessary for sustainable employability as conceptualised within the Capability framework [2, 4].

The vulnerability of this migration pattern became particularly evident during the global pandemic, when large-scale reverse migration toward the North-Eastern states took place [21]. The rapid slowdown of urban economies exposed the limited availability of durable capabilities and social protection mechanisms for migrant youth. Upon returning to regions already affected by infrastructural inadequacies, many individuals encountered restricted opportunities, placing additional pressure on local resources and contributing to rising unemployment levels.

The prolonged outflow of youth contributes to demographic decline and the erosion of intellectual resources across the region. As educated and capable individuals continue to migrate outward, the region loses a substantial portion of its human capital, thereby weakening local entrepreneurial activity, community-based initiatives and civil society development [15, 16]. Viewing migration as a consequence of capability deprivation instead of a purely successful labour-market strategy underscores the necessity for localised interventions focused on enhancing capabilities and sustainable opportunities within the region.

### **3.3 Socio-Political Volatility and Constraints on Employability**

Within the Capability Approach, the socio-political environment is regarded as an active determinant shaping the conversion of resources into meaningful opportunities rather than as a merely passive context [1, 2]. The effective transformation of human capital into sustainable economic participation depends upon the presence of stable institutional conditions. In North East India, however, the socio-political landscape has long been characterised by instability, ethno-political tensions and recurring periods of civic unrest [13, 15]. Viewed through Amartya Sen's multidimensional framework, these persistent conditions function as structural barriers that restrict educated youth from achieving stable and sustainable employment opportunities.

The disruption of educational continuity represents one of the most immediate effects of regional instability. Human capital development requires sustained institutional participation, yet in districts affected by civic unrest, blockades and localised conflict, academic schedules are repeatedly interrupted. Such conditions produce fragmented educational experiences for students. Research indicates that these disruptions not only postpone the completion of qualifications but also weaken the quality of skills acquired during the learning process [20]. Consequently, although many young people eventually obtain

formal credentials, the erosion of foundational competencies places them at a capability disadvantage in comparison with students educated in more politically stable environments.

Beyond its educational consequences, ethno-political volatility significantly affects the macroeconomic conditions of the region. In contemporary economies, formal employment opportunities are largely driven by private-sector investment, which tends to be highly responsive to political and security-related uncertainty. Ongoing tensions and unpredictable civic disturbances discourage both domestic and international investors from establishing economic activities within the region [15]. Consequently, industrial and service-sector development remains limited. For educated youth, this creates a restricted opportunity structure in which stable local employment markets fail to expand because of persistent political uncertainty [13].

Persistent instability gradually alters the ways in which young people envision and plan their futures. A key dimension of the Capability Approach involves the freedom to pursue meaningful and self-determined life trajectories [3]. Yet, in socio-politically unstable settings, the capacity to invest in long-term professional or entrepreneurial aspirations is weakened. Uncertainty reduces confidence in future opportunities, encouraging short-term coping strategies rather than sustained capability expansion. Consequently, many educated youths become concentrated in precarious informal work or migrate to mainland urban regions in search of more stable prospects [13, 16].

It is important to recognise that many national skill-development policies are designed on the assumption of politically stable implementation environments. When vocational training programmes are introduced without considering the realities of regional instability, their effectiveness becomes significantly limited. The provision of technical skills alone cannot protect youth from the economic disruptions created by civic unrest, blockades or political tensions. Unless the socio-political environment evolves into a supportive conversion factor, employability in North East India is likely to remain structurally restricted.

### **3.4 Cultural Expectations and Labour-Market Preferences**

The Capability Approach emphasises that individuals should have genuine freedom to pursue occupational paths they personally value [1, 2]. In North East India, however, career choices are strongly shaped by deeply rooted cultural expectations and historical social norms. Public-sector employment continues to be widely regarded as the most reliable indicator of socio-economic security and prestige. Contemporary studies on employment preferences reveal a persistent inclination toward government jobs, while private enterprise and informal-sector work are often viewed as less desirable alternatives [17]. From the perspective of Amartya Sen's framework, these social expectations operate as restrictive conversion factors that limit the range of psychological and social capabilities available to educated youth.

Under prevailing macroeconomic constraints, the scarcity of public-sector opportunities has led a substantial number of educated young people toward participation in the informal economy. Evidence from regions suggests that this shift is largely driven by necessity rather than voluntary preference [25]. In many cases, informal employment emerges as an adaptive response to exclusion from stable labour-market opportunities. However, work within the informal sector is frequently associated with insecurity, weak legal protection and limited access to social welfare benefits. Consequently, while informal labour may ease immediate financial pressures, it often falls short of providing the secure and dignified livelihood conditions central to capability achievement [1, 25].

Regional development strategies frequently advocate youth entrepreneurship as a solution to persistent unemployment. Recent scholarship emphasises that the creation of a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem is essential for broader regional economic transformation [22]. However, entrepreneurship can operate as a

meaningful capability only when supported by enabling institutional structures rather than emerging merely as a response to economic survival. Existing studies on enterprise development in North East India point to continuing institutional barriers, especially in relation to access to finance [23]. Although many young people demonstrate entrepreneurial aspirations, the mechanisms required to convert those aspirations into sustainable ventures remain insufficient. Limited credit access, inadequate financial guidance and weak market integration continue to restrict entrepreneurial growth. As a result, while policies promote enterprise development, youth often remain without the institutional support necessary for long-term success.

This dynamic creates a structural double constraint for educated youth. On one hand, cultural expectations strongly encourage the pursuit of formal employment opportunities that the regional economy is unable to generate at sufficient levels. On the other hand, alternative occupational pathways such as entrepreneurship and informal-sector work continue to face social stigma or lack adequate institutional support [22, 25]. Unless these cultural perceptions are challenged and stronger institutional mechanisms, such as accessible micro-finance systems and enterprise support structures, are developed, the range of viable occupational choices available to youth will remain limited. Consequently, resolving youth unemployment in the region requires not only infrastructural expansion but also broader socio-cultural transformation in the recognition and support of diverse forms of labour.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Synthesising the Capability Deprivations

Contemporary regional development frameworks often face criticism for examining socio-economic conditions in fragmented ways. Through the analytical perspective of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the employment difficulties affecting North East India can instead be understood as the outcome of interconnected structural dynamics rather than isolated variables [1, 3]. The capability deprivation experienced by youth is shaped by the cumulative interaction of demographic, infrastructural, socio-political and cultural deficits, all of which operate together to constrain meaningful employment opportunities.

The interaction of these multiple structural constraints substantially increases the vulnerability of the educated population. Limited access to reliable digital and physical infrastructure [10] places youth at an early disadvantage by restricting their participation in contemporary economic activities. At the same time, persistent socio-political instability weakens investor confidence and obstructs the infrastructural development essential for broader economic participation [15]. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of underdevelopment where instability delays infrastructural advancement and infrastructural deficits further reduce employment and livelihood opportunities for youth.

In response to these constrained structural conditions, youth experience fragmented demographic outcomes. A large section of the young population is driven toward migration in search of employment ecosystems available in mainland metropolitan regions [13, 16]. Meanwhile, those who remain within the region often face cultural expectations that privilege government employment and marginalise alternative career pathways, leading many into insecure and weakly supported informal-sector occupations [25].

The combined effects of these overlapping deprivations are visible in broader macroeconomic trends. The elevated unemployment levels reported in the Periodic Labour Force Surveys and the substantial proportion of youth identified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) should not be viewed as isolated irregularities [8, 9]. Instead, they reflect measurable consequences of a regional environment

where multiple adverse conversion factors undermine the effective utilisation of human capital. The employment crisis in North East India must therefore be understood not as a simple shortage of individual skills but as a multidimensional failure of the socio-economic environment to support capability realisation [4, 7, 24].

#### 4.2 Reassessing Skill-Based Employment Policies

The synthesis of multiple forms of capability deprivation calls for a critical reassessment of dominant employment policy frameworks. Current national employment strategies, including region-specific interventions in North East India, remain largely grounded in human capital perspectives. Policy emphasis is placed on vocational education, digital certification and short-duration skill-training programmes designed to improve workforce readiness [11, 19]. These initiatives assume that enhancing technical competencies will automatically translate into employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that skill acquisition by itself remains inadequate when broader environmental and structural conversion factors continue to constrain capability realisation [2, 6].

It is argued that continued prioritisation of isolated skill development in North East India, without addressing foundational capability constraints, produces paradoxical outcomes. The region increasingly generates a demographic of technically certified individuals who remain structurally unemployable within their native context [18, 20]. A digital certificate offers no substantive freedom if broadband connectivity is absent, just as entrepreneurial ambition yields no return when socio-political instability obstructs access to micro-finance and market linkages [23].

To achieve sustainable employability, a conceptual shift in regional policy is required. Interventions must move beyond “skill acquisition” and transition toward comprehensive “capability enhancement”. This entails recognising that industrial and infrastructural policies, such as the UNNATI scheme [12], are not peripheral economic measures but essential educational and employment prerequisites. A capability-centric approach would mandate that state-sponsored skilling programs be structurally paired with localised investments in physical infrastructure and institutional credit accessibility.

The operationalisation of such enhancement necessitates the adoption of targeted, micro-level interventions through which human capital may be systematically aligned with contextual and infrastructural readiness. Instead of reproducing standardised mainland employment frameworks, greater emphasis should be placed upon the development of resilient local economic ecosystems capable of functioning despite intermittent ethno-political instability [15]. This integration may be achieved through several interrelated mechanisms.

Priority should be accorded to the establishment of government-assisted, micro-grid-enabled workspaces furnished with reliable broadband connectivity across semi-urban and rural regions. Such infrastructural investments are considered essential for addressing localised developmental deficits, thereby enabling young individuals to utilise acquired competencies within the contemporary gig economy as well as within digitally coordinated and legally protected cooperative structures. In addition, by operating as decentralised “remote-work corridors,” these hubs would enable educated youth to secure metropolitan-level earnings without the necessity of physical migration, thereby reducing the structural pressures that contribute to involuntary out-migration.

In order to ensure that entrepreneurial aspirations generate sustainable outcomes, acquired competencies should be linked to dependable financial support mechanisms. The introduction of capability-linked micro-grants, wherein successful completion of state-sponsored vocational training automatically results

in eligibility for collateral-free seed funding, would substantially reduce the institutional constraints presently impeding youth-led enterprise development.

To challenge the deeply embedded cultural preference for public-sector employment, entrepreneurial and informal livelihood pathways should be accorded greater institutional legitimacy and social recognition. This objective may be facilitated through the provision of formalised social protection measures, including subsidised healthcare schemes and pension co-contribution arrangements for registered youth cooperatives. Through such measures, non-governmental employment pathways may gradually attain the socio-economic security and dignity necessary for transforming prevailing labour-market preferences.

Given the recurring socio-political volatility characterising the region, employment policies should further be structured around the principles of decentralisation and resilience. Excessive dependence upon centralised industrial clusters, which remain highly susceptible to civic disturbances and political instability, ought to be minimised through the promotion of community-managed economic systems. In this regard, the institutionalisation of localised cooperative networks and asynchronous digital work arrangements is considered necessary to ensure the continuity of economic participation during periods of disruption. Such decentralised frameworks would significantly enhance the capacity of youth populations to sustain capability expansion even amidst conditions of regional institutional uncertainty and instability. Ultimately, for the youth of North East India, developmental success cannot be measured by the number of degrees awarded or certificates issued. Within the Capability Framework, success is achieved only when the socio-economic environment is sufficiently stabilised and integrated to grant youth the substantive freedom to utilise their education [1, 6].

## 5. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that addressing the persistent youth unemployment crisis in North East India requires moving beyond traditional human capital models. Systemic barriers, including severe infrastructural deficits, ethno-political volatility and rigid socio-cultural expectations, act as negative conversion factors that neutralise the practical value of formal education and vocational training. Consequently, educated youth face profound capability deprivation, driving involuntary migration and entrenching localised economic stagnation.

Resolving this demographic challenge demands a conceptual pivot in regional policymaking from isolated skill acquisition to comprehensive capability enhancement. It is proposed that human capital development must be structurally paired with localised environmental readiness. By establishing decentralised digital hubs powered by micro-grids, existing broadband voids can be circumvented, allowing youth to participate in the modern digital economy without migrating. Furthermore, transforming vocational credentials into actionable economic power requires institutional backing; introducing capability-linked micro-grants would provide immediate, collateral-free capital to newly certified youth. Ultimately, true employability in North East India cannot be measured by the distribution of degrees but by the cultivation of a stable, enabling environment that grants youth the substantive freedom to secure dignified, localised livelihoods.

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