

A Cosmopolitan Race: Representations of Northeast Migrants in Delhi-NCR

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With neo-liberalization and globalization of urban India, there has been a marked increase of out-migration of youth from the Northeast to the metropolitan cities. As pointed out by scholars, the people of the region are governed by a visual regime of racialization that is rooted in the colonial practices of frontier making and racial anthropology. Inherited by postcolonial India, this regime excludes them from the hegemonic imaginary of the 'Indian face' and leads to their subjection to structural forms of quotidian racism. This visual regime is both arbitrary and homogenizing as it ignores those without visibly Mongoloid phenotypes and subjectivizes those with phenotypes but not connected with the native communities in the Northeast. This paper primarily analyses the popular representations of migrants from the Northeast to Delhi NCR through the optic of *cosmopolitanism*. It contends that the same visual regime that treats such migrants as racial 'others' also attracts their labour to the cosmopolitan consumer spaces. Youth from the frontier migrate to these urban centres for higher education in premier universities, better socio-economic prospects, and to escape insurgency and displacement. Their labour is in turn sought after in the new industries such as organized retail, hospitality, aviation, call centres, security agencies, etc. This has created a niche for racialized labour from the Northeast in the service sector of metro cities. Outside these spaces of consumption, however, the same cosmopolitanism attributed to them is hypersexualized and perceived as a 'threat' to the civic order of the areas that house them. Their cultural practices and lifestyle are frequently scrutinised and policed by local interests and authorities. By linking these two paradoxical phenomena, this paper argues that cosmopolitanism signals a tendency of neoliberal capital to appropriate, commodify and control bodies and cultures of ethnic minorities, especially in spaces that absorb not only internally displaced people from different parts of the country but also international migrants and refugees. This practice of commodity cosmopolitanism leads to further racialization of minorities and the reinforcement of racializing practices. There is, however, a substantive form of cosmopolitanism among the Northeast migrants, based on values of openness and conviviality and that simultaneously contests and widens the racialized identity of the 'Northeastern'.

