

Seventh Critical Studies Conference, 2022

Migrant Asias

Refugees, Statelessness & Migrant Labour Regimes

Panel Title:

Metamorphosis of the Migrant: State, Migration and Identity Politics

Paper Title:

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

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17th-18th November, 2022

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Kolkata

Abstract:

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'.

Keywords: migrant, labour, cosmopolitanism, race, Northeast India

(Word count: 8097)

Introduction: Neoliberal Cities, Migrants and Cosmopolitanism

Much of the academic discussions on migrants and refugees has been on legal, political and economic issues such as citizenship, rights, statehood, labour exploitation, electoral representation and so on. Little attention has been paid to the matter of public ethics and socialization that concern with how different migrant, refugee and/or local groups coexist. Cosmopolitanism is “fundamentally a reality forced on the city; it encompasses contesting spaces, intentions, and attitudes that the city cannot escape.”¹ A study of migrant cosmopolitan practices could provide a window into their daily experiences and struggles of livelihood in the cities, how they navigate urban life and negotiate with co-citizens or co-habitants, and how they make way in the political field or labour market. In other words, practices of cosmopolitanism can reveal the emergent subjectivities and complex locations of agency in this neoliberal age.

The reality of cosmopolitanism, or ‘cosmopolitanism of reality’ as some scholars put it (Fine 2007), constitutes the contemporary global regime of cosmopolitanism. This global regime is a product of various processes of globalization such as the expanding global networks of a world market; the growing outreach of media and the internet; the growing phenomenon of migration; cross-cultural encounters and emergence of hybrid cultures; the rise of global cities and so on. At the core of this cosmopolitan structure of institutions and processes is the normative orientation or an ethics of cosmopolitanism that emanated from the Western philosophical tradition. Although scholars are now attempting to trace the roots of cosmopolitan theory in postcolonial thought (Singh 2013), yet the dominant discourse of moral universalism is a Eurocentric one that is rooted in the project of liberal modernity. While the earliest proponents of cosmopolitanism, the Cynics and the Stoics of Ancient Greece, had denounced their allegiance to the city-states and become detached world citizens, German philosopher Immanuel Kant sought for a middle ground between individuals’ affiliation to their political community in the state and their lawful relations with other states and a world-state (Cheah and Robbins 1998). Kant’s abstract universal

¹ Wu Hung, “Zhang Dali’s Dialogue: Conversation with a City,” in *Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Sheldon Pollock, et al., (Duke University Press, 2002), 206.

morality became institutionalized with the ushering of numerous international organizations in the twentieth century such as the League of Nations, the Bretton Woods system of finance, global civil societies such as the Amnesty International, Red Cross, etc. The rise of these global institutions corresponded to the emergence of the global regime of human rights that was envisaged in Kant's vision of 'cosmopolitan right'.

Critics from both the West and the East have highlighted that, on the garb of moral universalism, cosmopolitanism has been no more than an ideological tool of capitalism, colonialism as well as neo-imperialism. Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels had revealed that cosmopolitanism is a dominant class ideology that had led to the destruction of national industries, literature and civilizations in the hands of a single oppressive regime of production (Marx 2002). They conceded that this cosmopolitanism was to be challenged and supplanted by a more ideal and higher form of proletarian cosmopolitanism with its emancipatory project of world-historical communism. Today, culture and traditions of old cities have been ruthlessly erased by urban planners and real estate developers to give them a world-class cosmopolitan appeal so as to attract foreign capital. Cosmopolitanism in the neoliberal era is, therefore, a radicalization of Anglo-American ideology of liberal internationalism. This new cosmopolitanism "proposes a set of disciplinary regimes - characteristically dubbed, in the oleaginous jargon of the period, "global governance" - reaching deep into the economic, social and political life of the states subject to it, while safeguarding international flows of finance and trade."²

Cosmopolitan disciplinary regime is not always the sole determinant of people's experiences of cosmopolitanism. Everyday cosmopolitan practices of societies and groups, in turn, do not reflect nor engender a global cosmopolitan consciousness. Therefore, contemporary scholars of cosmopolitanism have advocated for a plural understanding of competing cosmopolitanisms in lieu of a single Western idea of universalism (Breckenridge, et al. 2002). They insist on undertaking empirical investigations of vernacular expressions and quotidian embodiments of cosmopolitanisms that potentially hold the possibility for a new politics of solidarity and belongingness (Jabri 2011). Moreover, the victims of globalization have replaced the privileged bourgeois elites as the iconic cosmopolitans of our neoliberal age. Today, the status of the

² Peter Gowan, "The New Liberal Cosmopolitanism," in *Debating Cosmopolitics* edited by Daniele Archibugi (Verso, 2003), 52.

cosmopolitan is increasingly conferred upon migrants, refugees, diasporic people, exiled or displaced populations who essentially constitute the ‘problem’ rather than the heralds of multiculturalism. Their legal status and socio-cultural identity are constantly put into question and local social fabrics seem to remain invested in the daily politics of maintaining their ‘otherness’.

Northeastern migrants as Racialized Cosmopolitans

The migrants from the Northeast region in Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) are one such groups whose socio-economic and political status are constantly disciplined through the lens of cosmopolitanism which this paper seeks to critically investigate. Most of the populations in the Northeast have the so-called ‘Mongoloid’ phenotypes and unique cultural practices, neither of which seem to embody proper ‘Indianness.’ This has led to their ‘otherization’ as racial minorities or ‘outsiders.’ Providentially, their very ‘otherization’ from the hegemonic imaginative national identity and culture has led to their economic inclusion in the city’s cosmopolitan spaces, most prominently in the neoliberal service sector (McDuie-Ra 2012). Based on my M.Phil. work and an on-going ethnography for my Ph.D., this paper argues that there is a fundamental disjuncture in representation, lived-experiences as well as practices of cosmopolitanism among the racialized migrants that potentially reveal the complexity of their subjectivities. While their physical ‘otherness’ is valorized in the capital city’s affective service industries because of their ‘un-Indian’ cosmopolitan appeal, outside the economic spaces their ‘otherness’ is effectively maintained through social discrimination and violence. These twin processes of violent commodification and reinforcement of racialization is, however, challenged by migrants’ own multicultural ethos and practices. There is an emergent pan-Northeastern identity which is potentially cosmopolitan, as it tends to push the confines of territoriality and race, and seemingly subaltern, as it is a counter-hegemonic identity forged from below (McDuie-Ra 2012).

Labour Migration from the Northeast in India’s metropolitan cities

The phenomenon of mass labour out-migration from the Northeast region is characteristically an event of post-liberalization period. Immediately after the country’s independence, ethnic and tribal communities in the Northeast, that had little to no share in India’s independence

movement, started demanding their right to self-determination. Therefore, for a long period of time, until the simmering down of secessionism, the natives of the region had refrained from moving outside the frontier. The out-migration from the region in this period of self-determination occurred in small scale that was limited to the political and educated elites (Remesh 2012, Rai 2021). Due to political and economic neglect from the centre, the region of Northeast has suffered from several structural debilities - lag in industrialisation and infrastructural development, unsustainable extraction of natural resources, ceaseless atmosphere of insecurity and militarization, poor educational system, non-functional local governments, widespread unemployment, and so on (Remesh 2012, Banti 2017, Marchang 2017). But it is the change in psyche and aspirations of several ethnic groups in terms of secessionism that really provided the impetus for the acceleration and class diversification of out-migration from the region to other parts of the country. The central government initiated a series of negotiations, peace talks and ceasefire agreements with numerous rebel outfits across the frontier region, starting with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) in 1997. In a way, these official as well as “unofficial” (Das 2014) peace processes reflected the overall psyche of the younger generation of the region who, according to scholar Thongkhohal Haokip, “kept aside the pangs of alienation and started identifying themselves with the larger Indian nationhood.”³ As noted by anthropologists such as Dolly Kikon, Bengt Karlsson and Duncan McDuie-Ra and as documented in my own research, several youths from the region have chosen to move to metropolitan cities in order to escape the consequences of militancy and ethnic conflicts that have long stagnated the progress and development of the region. The earlier feeling of resentment towards the India ‘proper’ is, thus, said to have been replaced by the desire for socio-economic mobility in the urban centres of the ‘mainland.’

The North East Support Centre and Helpline (NESCH), a non-profit non-governmental organization for Northeastern migrants in Delhi-NCR, had recorded that there were around 414,850 Northeasterners living in various parts of the country as of 2011. This number had supposedly jumped twelve-fold from 2005 to 2011 with an average rise of 13.62% per annum. Delhi is estimated to be the highest receiver with over 200,000 migrants (or 48.21% of the total

³ Thongkhohal Haokip, “From ‘Chinky’ to ‘Coronavirus’: racism against Northeast Indians during the Covid-19 pandemic,” (*Asian Ethnicity*, 2020), 15.

migrant population) as of 2011 (McDuie-Ra 2012). Other scholars have estimated that about 96% of the Northeastern migrants were young people between the age of 15 to 30, implying that the mass out-migration is a fairly recent phenomenon (Marchang 2018). The two foremost reasons for the mass migration from the frontier to metropolitan centres are higher education and job opportunities (Remesh 2012). A tentative observation from my own ongoing research is that youth who migrate for either education or employment end up as service workers in the new affective service industries of the city.

The emergence of neoliberal service industries and 'Mongoloid' workers in Delhi-NCR

The new service industries are products of India's liberalization reforms of the 1990s and the project of transforming Delhi into a world-class metropolis. While the policies of liberalization led to the ushering in of private international and domestic players in the Indian market, the urban development project in Delhi led to rapid infrastructural development and rise in provision of public goods and services through "the shift to entrepreneurialism in urban governance resting on public-private partnership"⁴ laid by the 74th Amendment of the Indian Constitution (1992). This twin process of liberalization and urbanization led to the emergence of a status-driven upper- and middle-classes consumerism that is characterised with a specific desire for 'foreign' or 'cosmopolitan' goods, services and aesthetics (Dupont 2011, Srivastava 2015). Consumer industries like shopping malls, luxury hotels, up-market restaurants and cafés and so on "promotes the 'foreign' as superior to the 'domestic' and, in turn, reflects and creates aspirations of 'success' as being embedded in global identities."⁵ These air-conditioned postmodernist spaces are, hence, to be shorn of religious, caste or vernacular signifiers that represent tradition or localism. In case street culture and traditional Indian aesthetics find a place in these neoliberal spaces, they are washed with transnational corporate flavour. These 'de-Indianized' cosmopolitan consumer spaces, therefore, prohibit those who lack the socio-economic capital to afford these global services or whose bodies are marked with 'Indianness.' These excluded

⁴ V. D. N. Dupont, "The Dream of Delhi as a Global City", (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2011), 534.

⁵ *Ibid.* 541.

groups are often the poor migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or West Bengal whose very labour were exploited in building the infrastructure of this consumer culture.



Photograph I (Date- 8th October, 2022; Time- 4:46 PM):

A Korean Boba (bubble) tea café in B-6 market, Safdarjung Enclave. Korean popular music, known as K-pop, television drama series, skin-care cosmetics and fast food like Ramen noodles and boba tea have become popular through social media across the world. This café is frequented by young hipster crowd from neighbouring posh localities as well as young Northeastern migrants. While the servers and baristas are mostly Northeastern 'Mongoloid' migrants, the queue of platform delivery personnel, waiting eagerly outside the café to get their orders on time, are non-Mongoloid faces mostly from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

(Photo credit: Anasma Gayari)

The young ‘Mongoloid’ migrants from the Northeast region whose faces and physical aesthetics do not seem to embody ‘Indianness’ are absorbed by these industries as services providers. Their supposed ‘Mongoloid’ look that predominantly consist of high cheek bones, yellowish skin tones and epicanthic fold do not figure in the hegemonic imagination of an ‘Indian face’ as argued by anthropologists Jelle J. P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba (2013). Their sartorial choices are considered to be Western or Korean, in other words, ‘un-Indian’, and their disposition and demeanour suitable for professional soft skills training that prepare them to endure volatile working environment. Moreover, as they live away from their families in search for career and livelihood, the young migrant workers are seemingly ready to dedicate themselves in odd-hour jobs, such as graveyard shifts in the call centres and bars, and on-call duty, such as in the airlines industry. These neoliberal industries with their flexible entry and exit rules provide the safety net for the young migrants against the problem of unemployment in public sector and the possibility of sliding down into poverty. As the report by the M.P. Bezbaruah Committee, a special committee formed by the Ministry of Home Affairs “to look into the concerns of the people of the North East living in other parts of the country” in response to the tragic murder of Nido Taniam, a student from Arunachal Pradesh, in 2014, noted, “There are many establishments which prefer to employ people from the North East with their oriental looks and knowledge of English. The people from the North East have a reputation for sincerity and reliability. The general impression is that they are ready to work for less remuneration.”⁶

According to sociologist Eileen Otis, in a consumer economy “the body is used as an index for ethical commitments, a sign of aspirations for class membership, and a vehicle of consumption as part of labour discipline.”⁷ In Indian service economy, the bodies of the ‘un-Indian’ Mongoloid service workers thereby undergo racialization to generate ethical and aesthetical values for cosmopolitan consumerism. Their commercialized ‘otherization’ through a visual regime of orientalism has granted them access to the neoliberal economic spaces and forged a niche for them in the emerging new service sector. The employability potential of the

⁶ Bezbaruah Committee, “Report of The Committee under the Chairmanship of Shri M.P Bezbaruah to Look into the Concerns of the People of the Northeast Living in Other Parts of the Country,” (*New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs*, 2014), 11.

⁷ Eileen Otis, “China’s Beauty Proletariat: The Body Politics of Hegemony in A Walmart Cosmetics Department,” (*Positions*, 2016), 156.

‘Mongoloid’ has certainly caught the attention of government and corporate interests with training agencies in hospitality and aviation already making inroads to the remote areas of the region. The central government has also announced the launch of skill development programmes that would increase the employability of Northeastern youths. A government survey estimated that between 2011-2021, the region would have 17 million youths for only 2.6 million opportunities, thus pushing an excess of 14 million indigenous youths either to unemployment or to compete for jobs in metropolitan cities (Kikon and Karlsson 2019). In 2019, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) had proposed a scheme to incentivize the establishment of Business Processing Output industry in the Northeast region that would employ the youth in customer care jobs.⁸

The ‘Northeast’ as a ‘Race’: From colonial and postcolonial to cosmopolitan constructions

As much as the term ‘race’ is a discursive idea, the term ‘Northeast’ of India is also a politically constructed concept. Just like the concept of ‘race’, the directional name ‘Northeast’ of India is marked by projects of colonialism and nationalism and, thus, do not evoke any “historical memory or collective consciousness” in a primordial sense (Bora 2019, Baruah 2021). This region predominantly occupied by hill tribes between Bengal and Burma got its first nomenclature as North-East Frontier Tracts and, later, North-East Frontier Agency as it formed a part of the British ‘frontier system’ in India. Alexander Mackenzie is said to be the first to use the term ‘Northeast’ in his “Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal” (1869) (Hausing 2015, Samson 2017). In colonial accounts, the frontier, along with other areas in the Himalayan region, such as Nepal and Bhutan, were often referred to as the ‘Mongolian Fringe’ despite the clear presence of people with ‘non-Mongoloid’ features such as the caste Nepalese and the Bengali (Baruah 2013, Gergan and Smith 2021). For the colonials, tribes and ethnic communities of the frontier had no historical, cultural, linguistic or racial affinity with the people of, what was and is still acknowledged as, ‘India proper’ (Baruah 2013). This was the time when colonial officials and anthropologists had imported European ‘scientific’ racial theories and utilised it for the enumeration of castes and religion. Colonial injection of Eurocentric race

⁸ Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, “North East BPO Promotion Scheme (NEBPS)” (*Government of India*, 2019). [URL: <https://www.meity.gov.in/nebps>.]

ideology into Indian caste system had pushed the Aryan conspiracy and the idea of the Golden Age of Hinduism to the forefront of Indian nationalist discourse. This relegated Dalits and tribal communities of the subcontinent as well as the ‘lesser’ Dravidians of the South to the status of backward races. The ‘Mongoloid’ race, as applied to the populations of East and Central Asia, holds the status of inferiority and degradation in European racial hierarchy. In medical sciences, ‘Mongoloid’ or ‘Mongolism’ was associated with a mental deficiency due to a genetic condition commonly known as the Down Syndrome. Hence, the ‘Mongolian fringe’ of the Northeast was perceived as a backward geographical space inhabited by incorrigible and savage tribals who were biologically and culturally distant from the Indian ‘mainland.’

On the pretext of the incorrigibility and backwardness of the frontier, the colonial government had enacted a series of protective laws such as the Inner Line Regulation (1873), the Backward Tracts Act (1919) and Partially Excluded and Excluded Areas Act (1935). These legislations were inherited by the post-colonial state in the form of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution (Hausing 2015). The directional name was also made official through the formation of the North Eastern Council in 1971 under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) that acts as a statutory advisory body for the eight states in the region. Along with the legal and administrative structure, post-colonial India also inherited the unabashed racialized gaze towards the Northeast which led to the continued seclusion and isolation of the region from the rest of the country.

India’s first Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel famously wrote to his Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about his apprehensions about the “pro-Mongoloid prejudice” and a potential for trouble in the region in the wake of Indo-China conflicts. He wrote, “All along the Himalaya in the north and northeast, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnologically and culturally not different from Tibetans and Mongoloids.”⁹ Independence from British colonialism, thus, turned the people of the region into racial minorities overnight. The official racialized gaze accompanied racial policies for the severe securitization of the region in order to contain potential ‘troubles’ such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, (AFSPA). “Years of militarised violence through counter-insurgency operations have ‘othered’ the region as an

⁹ Cited in Mabel D. Gergan and Sara H. Smith, “Theorizing Racialization through India’s “Mongolian Fringe”,” (*Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2021), 6.

internal enemy, accentuated by notions of cultural difference, which has also established a form of military racism.”¹⁰ The blend of colonial and postcolonial racial gaze and security-oriented policies have constituted the people of the Northeast as ‘incomplete national subjects’ by maintaining an ‘internal’ form of colonialism (Bora 2010, Haokip 2012). The racial distinctiveness of the Northeast is however, not without counterclaims. In 1951 A. Z. Phizo, the Naga nationalist leader, deployed the concept of biological race to support Naga claim for right to self-determination. He said, “It is an undeniable fact that Nagas are not Indians. We distinctly and unmistakably belong to the great Mongolian family... The most important thing to consider is not merely one of politics but it is rather a problem of biology and psychology.”¹¹

Neoliberal Political Economy and Cosmopolitan Construction of the ‘Northeast’

“Regarding labour migrants, state borders in India have developed characteristics similar to international borders, steeped in extra legal narratives of “insider–outsider.””¹² Young ‘Mongoloid’ migrants who come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in search of job and education become the racial ‘others’ in college campuses or service industries of the city. The hegemonic ‘Indian face’ according to Wouters and Subba is “a “physiognomic map” whose outer boundaries are not delineated by markers of territoriality but are based on considerations of phenotypes, drawn on the conventional imaginings of what a co-citizen might look like.”¹³ Despite being pluralistic and inclusive, as it embraces a variety of phenotypes such as those of the Bengali, Dravidian, Gujarati and Maharashtrian, it outrightly excludes the ‘Mongoloid’ phenotypes associated with the people of Northeast and other Himalayan region. Young migrants in metro cities, therefore, become racialized as ‘outsiders’ or foreigners and are commonly misrecognized as Chinese, Nepalese, Thai, or Japanese tourists.

¹⁰ Papori Bora, “The Problem Without a Name: Comments on Cultural Difference (Racism) in India,” (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2019), 11.

¹¹ Jelle J. P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, “The “Indian Face,” India’s Northeast, and “The Idea of India,”” (*Asian Anthropology*, 2013), 4.

¹² Priyanka Jain and Nivedita Jayaram, “Precarious Citizenship: Internal Migrants and India’s Amended Citizenship Laws.” (*PS: Political Science & Politics*, 2021), 637.

¹³ Wouters and Subba, “The “Indian Face,” India’s Northeast, and “The Idea of India,”” 2.



Photograph II (Date- 9th October, 2022; Time- 4:08 PM):

A narrow alleyway puddled with rain water in Munirka village. Buildings constructed without following proper construction guidelines, clumps of electric and telephone wires hanging dangerously above the alleyways, absence of proper sanitation and garbage disposal system, lack of proper water supply, little to no sign of vegetation, unmaintained roads and narrow pathways that are barely fit for driving two wheelers are common feature of these urban villages. indicating absence of planning or civic utilities in these localities. Seen in this photograph are Northeastern women in their traditional clothes returning from Church services on a Sunday afternoon.

(Photo credit: Anasma Gayari)

Their misrecognition as racial ‘others’ make them susceptible to socio-economic and cultural discrimination and marginalization on an everyday basis. The 2012 incident of mass exodus of Northeast migrants from various cities of the country and the incidences of racial harassment against ‘Mongoloid’ looking people during the COVID-19 pandemic are case illustrations of their condition of alienation and insecurity (Haokip 2020, Kipgen 2020). The 2012 exodus occurred due to a tension between the Bodo tribe and Bengali Muslims in Assam, yet ‘Mongoloid’ migrants belonging to any tribe, ethnicity or state were indiscriminately subjected to violent assaults merely because of their ‘Mongoloid’ physical appearance. Similarly, spurred by the racist propaganda against Asians in the United States of America by calling the COVID-19 as ‘Chinese Virus’, Northeastern migrants in India were also suspected to be carriers of the virus on the mere pretext of their physical proximity with the Chinese people. A survey report by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) documented that people with distinctively ‘Mongoloid’ looks were racially discriminated and assaulted in public places and educational institutions across various states in India such as Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal (Kipgen 2020).¹⁴

‘Northeastern ghettos’ in Delhi’s Urban Villages

In a newspaper article, Mayank Austen Soofi, a popular photojournalist based in Delhi, describes the presence of a small Manipuri business in an urban village in South Delhi as the existence of a “barely acknowledged cosmopolitanism.”¹⁵ Delhi’s urban villages like Munirka, Humayunpur and Kishangarh in South and Indra Vihar and Vijaynagar in the North have become homes to Northeastern migrants. Also known as *Lal Doras* (as they were administratively demarcated by red chords), there are some 135 urban villages dotted across Delhi (Pati 2022). They are erstwhile agricultural settlements dominated by Jat and Gujjar communities that were exempted from the first *Master Plan of Delhi* (1962). This led to their exclusion from the urban

¹⁴ Suhas Chakma, “Coronavirus Pandemic: India’s Mongoloid Looking People Face Upsurge Of Racism,” (*Rights & Risks Analysis Group*, March 26, 2020). [URL: <http://www.rightsrisks.org/by-country/india/coronavirus-pandemic-indias-mongoloid-looking-people-face-upsurge-of-racism/>]

¹⁵ Mayank Austen Soofi, “Delhiwale: Manipur, 0 km, A One-of-Its Kind Grocery in South Delhi,” (*Hindustan Times*, 22 March, 2021).

[URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhinews/delhiwale-manipur-0-km-a-one-of-its-kind-grocery-in-south-delhi-101616362133652.html>]

infrastructural network of Delhi resulting in their disorganized and unrestrained growth (Chattopadhyay, Dey and Joel 2014). Despite the onslaught of urbanization of the capital city via the entry of private international capital, global consumer culture and real-estate projects, the urban villages have managed to preserve the look and character of villages through kinship-based networks such as the *khap panchayat* and vernacular forms of capitalism (Pati 2022).

As of 2010, unofficial estimates suggest that Delhi has 90,000 to 100,000 residences of migrants from the Northeast that are mostly concentrated in these urban villages (Remesh 2012). The increasing visibility of ‘Mongoloid’ looking migrants, the practice of living together due to the social insecurity and hostility, and their own place making practices of setting up shops, restaurants and small business over the years have transformed these urban villages into ‘Northeastern localities’ or, as popularly called, ‘Northeast ghettos’, thereby conferring an unexpected cosmopolitan status upon these neighbourhoods. Therefore, the other side of ‘otherization’ and racialization of the ‘Mongoloid’ migrants is their physical and cultural valorisation, in a manner which is deemed profitable to the city’s neoliberal political economy. According to Stuart Hall (1997), people who are significantly different from the majority, those who constitute ‘them’ rather than ‘us’, are frequently exposed to a “binary form of representation”: good or bad, cultured or primitive, ugly or exotically attractive, repelling or desirable and so on. This valorisation of Northeastern migrants is carried out through the lens and framework of cosmopolitanism offered by multicultural and neoliberal urban spaces.

The Northeastern migrants, according to anthropologist McDuie-Ra, demonstrate cosmopolitanism through their “knowledge of Western and Asian music, film, and fashion.”¹⁶ The ‘Mongoloid’ looking migrants are considered to be vehicles of foreign or ‘un-Indian’ aesthetics and culture. The constantly objectifying gaze upon the way they look, the way they dress, what they eat and what they do have reduced their bodies, identity and cultural practices into cosmopolitan commodities. Their popular portrayal as ‘Oriental’, ‘pan-Asian’ or ‘Western’, in other words, ‘un-Indian’, ‘foreign’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ is precisely what has granted them entry into the neoliberal economy. Any form of service work is essentially grounded on structural inequality between the “interactive subordination of workers and the corresponding entitlement

¹⁶ Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 141.

of clients.”¹⁷ It is more than a performative emotional labour as it is a “recognition of the customer’s limitless entitlement to the worker’s individualizing attention and effort”¹⁸ and “is tied in with a complex set of class, caste, and gender relationship.”¹⁹ As the ‘Mongoloid’ migrants enter the neoliberal service economy through their performative ‘un-Indianness’, their ‘otherization’ and ‘commodification’ as an ‘un-Indian’ race gets reified and their unequal racial relationship with the dominant upper-class ‘Indian’ service clients gets reinforced.

Desire and Violence of Cosmopolitanism: Racism against Northeastern Migrants

The shock of visibility of the young ‘Mongoloid’ migrants in the city, the sudden exposure to their cultural practices and their aestheticized value in the neoliberal job market have not always been welcome as multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism. There is a stark disjuncture in migrant self-experiences of urban cosmopolitanism. This disjuncture is between their inclusion in the urban labour market and their exclusion from the national society and cultural citizenship. Their commodification as a ‘race’ sway between the extremities of desire and repulsion that lead to layered forms of racial, cultural and sexual violence.

The threat of racial insecurity and alienation has pushed Northeastern migrants to settle together in the urban villages. Yet, the local customs and mores of these villages continually put their civility, morality and nationality into question and pressure them into a continuous process of negotiation and conflicts with the dominant local communities. They are involved in daily politics with the Jat, Gujjar and Punjabi landlords who quote inexorably high rent prices, morally police their food habits and dressing style and conduct a surveillance of their lifestyles. The politics of food involving Northeastern migrants has been a highly contentious issue in the city. This issue has been represented in a satirical Bollywood movie directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, a Khasi filmmaker from Meghalaya. In his movie, *Axone: A Recipe for Disaster* (2019), a group of young Northeastern migrants, who are the main protagonists of the movie are

¹⁷ Rachel Sherman, *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels*, (University of California Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Noopur Raval and Joyojeet Pal, “Making a “Pro”: ‘Professionalism’ after Platforms in Beautywork,” (*Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 3, CSCW, 2019), 175:2.

shown to have a conflict with their Punjabi landlord over the cooking of a strong-smelling Naga ethnic dish made out of fermented soyabeans, popularly known as *axone*. The North-eastern rentiers are given harsh injunctions against cooking ‘bad’ smelling food by the landlord and the locals, creating a situation of hue and cry. The smell of their food is equated with that of a ‘septic tank’, implying that their food is dirty or filthy. In 2005 the Delhi Police had actually issued a controversial pamphlet containing “Security tips for North East students/visitors in Delhi.” The advisory pamphlet asked migrants to avoid preparing “smelly food” such as bamboo shoots and *axone*, and, if they must, they were advised to do so “without creating ruckus in neighbourhood.” Northeastern diet has long been controlled or prohibited even in spaces with supposed liberal or multicultural values.

College and university campuses across cities in India, including the Northeast region such as North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and Mizoram University, have assigned separate mess or kitchens to Northeastern students for consumption of their ‘ethnic’ food so as to not offend ‘others’. While canteens or mess in university campuses have special days in a week when they serve South Indian, North Indian, Punjabi and sometimes even Chinese food, Northeastern food is rarely a part of such multicultural performative practices. As both Debbarma (2016) and Kikon (2022) argue, the issue with Northeastern food, from “smelly” fermented legumes to various kinds of meat, is not an issue of legality but that of civility or moral standards that is indubitably founded on hegemonic Brahmanical caste practices of vegetarianism and hygiene, the same practices that discriminate and suppress the dietary practices of lower castes and Muslim communities.

Paradoxically, the ethnocentric dietary policing of the Northeastern migrants in the urban villages is shelved and side-lined when it comes to profiting from their ‘exotic’ food and culture. Local landlords have capitalized on migrant food and culture through commercial rent from Northeastern restaurants, groceries and garment shops that throng the very neighbourhoods where locals and racial migrants cohabit. Many young migrants have ventured into small scale entrepreneurialism by setting up small retail shops and businesses that cater goods and services to the migrants. They also attract daily customers and clientele from neighbouring upper-class gated communities, such as Munirka Enclave, Vasant Kunj and Defence Colony, who desire for indulgence in unique ‘exotic’ experiences.



Photograph III (Date- 27th September, 2022; Time- 1:38 PM):

A narrow alleyway in Humayunpur village thronged with Northeastern shops and businesses. Many small entrepreneurs from the Northeast have ventured into setting up small scale businesses, groceries and garment shops which confer upon these urban villages a cosmopolitan appeal by attracting young consumers and clientele from posh neighbourhoods such as Vasant Kunj and Defence Colony. These exist alongside general grocery shop and other businesses run by the locals, a juxtaposition that captures the coexistence of global, regional and local and the unique political economy of Delhi's urban villages.

(Photo credit: Anasma Gayari)

Thus, ethnic culture practices and habits are permitted and endorsed only so long as it is packaged and made palatable as cosmopolitan commodities for the satisfaction of those who gain profit from it or have the socio-economic means to spend on it. Yet, when migrants observe their own ethnic habits and practices as a part of their daily consumption, it is seen as a transgression of civility. Sartorial choice is a similar issue of cosmopolitan contestation involving Northeastern migrants. They have a reputation of having a ‘Western’ or ‘Asian’ fashion sense and are considered as ‘experts’ in grooming themselves which have enabled their employment in industries where high value is attached to workers’ physical appearance and disposition such as salons and spas, clothing stores, aviation, hospitality sector, etc.

The apparent Western or Korean orientation their clothes and fashion become pretext of deducing racist perceptions about their sexuality and morality. A research conducted by sociologist Jyoti Puri recorded the following statement by a Delhiite man on Northeastern women, “I don’t know about these girls, *Bhai Sahib*, wearing what they do, showing their belly buttons.”²⁰ Ironically, the man reportedly had a very profitable business in imported ‘western’ clothes for over three decades. The tragic murder of Nido Taniam, the 20-year-old student from Arunachal Pradesh, transpired on the pretext of racist comments on his hairstyle and clothing. The three local men who murdered Taniam in the racial altercation had “mocked him for his longish, stylized, dyed hair, effeminate clothing and East Asian physical features (by reportedly calling him ‘chinki’).”²¹ The racist perceptions regarding Northeastern fashion and sexuality are also ingrained in state institutions. In the controversial 2005 Delhi Police reportedly had insensitive and racist injunctions pertaining to the dressing sense of Northeastern women. They were advised to not wear “revealing” dresses, to “avoid lonely road/ by-lane when dressed scantily” and to “dress according to the sensitivity of the local populace.”²²

²⁰ Jyoti Puri, “Stakes and States: Sexual discourses from New Delhi,” (*Feminist Review*, 2006), 141.

²¹ Palash Ghosh, “Nido Tania: Was Killing Of Student In Delhi A Hate Crime?” (*International Business Time*, 13 Feb, 2014). [URL: <https://www.ibtimes.com/nido-tania-was-killing-student-delhihate-crime-1555203>]

²² Cited in McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*, 108.



Photograph IV (Date- 9th October, 2022; Time- 3:46 PM):

An assortment of traditional food items from Northeast in a grocery shop in Munirka village. Captured in this photograph are raw and pickled bamboo shoot, dried fish packets and live snails. While the cooking of Northeastern food such as bamboo shoot and axone (fermented soybean) has been prohibited by the locals, even prompting the Delhi Police to release a booklet that seeks to educate migrants what not to cook and how to cook, these are openly sold in the retail grocery shops in the urban villages that bring profit to the landlords.

(Photo credit: Anasma Gayari)

Subjected to constant surveillance on what they eat, dress and do, Northeastern migrants are also stigmatised for their jobs in the cosmopolitan industries. Work places like call centres, shopping malls, hotels and airlines, where young men and women work closely during odd-hours, are popularly imagined as erotically charged spaces “that encouraged licentious behaviour on the part of young people beyond the disciplining gaze of parents and community members.” On the Facebook page of Helping Hands Society, an NGO for Northeast migrants, Robin Hibu, a highly revered IPS officer from Arunachal Pradesh, posted about the “FLIGHTS OF FANCIES of some NE air hostesses.” The original intent of the post was perhaps to alert Northeastern women about the vulnerabilities of living in the city and working in the airlines industry. However, a greater part of post was a ruthless stigmatization of feminized service jobs and patriarchal policing of lifestyle choices of Northeastern women.

The violence in the representation of Northeastern migrants have escalated into literal experiences of violence. A female respondent during my MPhil had shared a nerve-wrecking incident during her college days in the University of Delhi that illustrates the hypersexualized gaze upon Northeastern women. On evening around 8 PM as she and her friends had exited from the GTB Nagar metro station in North Delhi, a group of young ‘local’ men had abruptly stopped in front of them in an Audi car and whispered, ‘Rate kitna?’ (‘How much do you charge for sexual services?’). Another female respondent had experienced a similar incident near Humayunpur village gate in broad daylight as recently as August of this year. A young man who appeared to be in his 30s had asked her to spend a night with him in a hotel. The man was, with no surprise, in a BMW car. Ngurang Reena, a PhD scholar in Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University from Arunachal Pradesh, writes about similar encounters with male strangers in Delhi offering sex. In Reena’s cases too, the men, whom she encountered in modern cosmopolitan spaces such as cafés and hotels, seem to be of a certain privileged status. This sexual fetish towards Northeastern women is represented in the movie *Axone* where the Punjabi landlord’s son looks for a girlfriend from Northeast for “time pass.”

The perceptions about their promiscuous morality and hypersexual nature are then utilized to make justifications for the mental, physical and sexual violence against the Northeastern migrants. In a 2005 rape case of a young woman from Northeast in Dhaula Kuan of Delhi, the advocate reportedly defended the accused man’s innocence by alleging that the victim had an

‘active sexual life’ (Puri 2006). This imagined hypersexuality of Northeastern women implies that the violence against them should not be counted as they are incapable of being violated. A similar instance of victim-blaming Northeastern women was done in a 2014 diktat passed by the panchayat of Munirka when a 14-year-old girl from Manipur was raped by her landlord’s son. Northeastern migrants were allegedly labelled as ‘gandey log’ (meaning, dirty people) and a rumoured decision was taken to get rid of the migrants from their place (Kashyap 2016).

The moral onus of racist violence against the bodies and character of Northeastern women falls upon their own self as institutions such as the Delhi Police, college authorities and others impose cultural and moral rules and regulations upon the migrants through continuous surveillance. After the Dhaula Kuan incident, Virender Kumar, the then Vice Principal of Kirori Mal College in Delhi, reportedly gave a directive that salwar kameez should be a standard ‘dress code’ for Northeastern girls in Delhi so that sexual harassment and rape is avoided (Sandham 2005). Reportedly, the principal also gave the following statement: “All the NE (Northeast) girls are sent by the militants of the region in order to seduce the mainland people so they are molested (and) raped. In this way, they are trying to culminate anti-Indian sentiment.”

Pan-Northeastern Identity: A Subaltern Cosmopolitanism

Neoliberal cosmopolitanism, therefore, seems to be a thin thread by which Northeastern migrants live, survive and stay relevant in the city. This aesthetical global ethos is what, on the one hand, makes them valuable in the neoliberal market of labour and commodities and, on the other hand, relegate them to the status of racial ‘others.’ However, there is another layer to the cosmopolitan subjectivity of the Northeastern migrants, one which challenges their subjugation as an inferior ‘race’ by reshaping that very identity from below. The shared sense of insecurity, marginalization and alienation as racial ‘outsiders’ in the metro cities has generated a sense of solidarity among the ‘Mongoloid’ migrants. The new emotional and psychological solidarity through collective experiences of racism has led to the subversion of the earlier inferiorizing connotations of the term ‘Northeast’. Scholars have unanimously labelled it as a ‘pan-Northeastern identity’, yet this label defies geopolitical and cultural confines by embracing people with similar physiognomy and experiences of racism from outside the region, such as migrants from West Bengal, Ladakh, Nepal, Tibet, and Burma (McDuie-Ra 2012, Baruah 2021, Wouters and Subba 2013). Migrants from Ladakh, Darjeeling, Nepal as well as refugees from

Myanmar and Tibet share accommodations and businesses with Northeastern migrants in the urban villages.

Delhi has numerous informal Northeastern bodies such as ethnic and tribal associations, Church groups and student forums that act as a crucial support system and safety net for the migrants. Besides organizing socio-cultural functions as indigenous festivals or Christmas, these bodies perform a number of social welfare functions that range from collecting donations, providing monetary assistance and arranging for hospitalization to those in need to even organizing funerals and arranging for the logistics of deceased persons to their homes. University and colleges in Delhi have various umbrella organizations for Northeastern students' such as the North East Students' Society in Delhi University (NESSDU) and North East Students' Forum in Jawaharlal University. These pan-organizations exist adjacent to other associations with state, tribal or religious affiliations. For example, along with the All-Assamese Students' Association, New Delhi, that represent students from all ethnic backgrounds from Assam, there are other smaller community associations that cater to different community needs such as the Mising Students' Association, All Bodo Students Union, etc. These associations can also be cross-regional or cross-religious such as the Nepalese Students Association of Delhi University has members not only from the Darjeeling Hills district of West Bengal but also from other states like Assam and Manipur.

The North East Support Centre and Helpline (NESCH) is an important non-profit organization that was started in 2007 by Lansinglu Rongmei, a Nagamese lawyer. She started this NGO to assist migrants who have faced violence and discrimination. With the initiative of Robin Hibu, an IPS officer from Arunachal Pradesh, Delhi Police now has started a special unit for Northeast People. Hibu also introduced a NE 24X7 Helpline number 1093 and started a non-profit NGO called Helping Hands Society for the assistance of Northeastern migrants. Several women from the Northeast whom I have met during the course of research did, however, complain harsh surveillance and moral policing of their lifestyle and career choices by these organizations and elders of their communities as exemplified by the Facebook post on Northeastern female flight attendants flagged earlier.

Women are not only advised against working in industries that are perceived as all-glamorous and erotically charged, but they are also warned against relationships and marriage with men

from outside their community or religion or locals from Delhi, North Indians and even African nationals, and when they do so, often times, they are socially stigmatised and shunned.

This politics of belongingness is a comparatively new phenomenon as up until the recent past the region, far from being a coherent cultural union, has been rife with ethnic clashes and identity conflicts. Several scholars have also put the tangibility and purpose of this identity to question (Haokip 2012, Ngaihte 2013, Ngaihte and Hanghal 2017). They highlight the ephemerality of the new pan identity by suggesting that the solidarity is mostly limited to the metropolitan cities and to the educated Northeastern youths. Politics in the region continues to be based on competing identity claims involving tribes, ethnicities, migrants as well as refugees that have culminated in frequent violent clashes resulting in displacement, death and loss of properties. The Rabha- Garo conflict of 2010-2011, tension between the Bodos and Muslims in Assam, the Kuki-Naga political conflicts, border disputes Assam and Meghalaya, etc. are case illustrations. A lesser-known truth is that even though all communities in the Northeast are in some way or the other oppressed and affected by the regime of AFSPA, there are “some peripheral communities within the North-East periphery have little problem with the Act” as the presence of the regime protects the minorities from the threat of oppression by militants of other dominant communities (Haokip 2011, Ngaihte and Hanghal 2017). Therefore, according to scholars, the homogenous representation of the region through a pan-identity only serves the interests of the dominant communities of the Northeast and causes a concern for the erasure of culture and political demands of the minorities (Ngaihte and Hanghal 2017). Moreover, not all native populations in the Northeast have the stereotypical ‘Mongoloid’ phenotype, for example caste Nepalese, caste Assamese and Bengalis or people with mixed parentage, who might blend in with the ‘mainland’ Indians and escape racial profiling. This puts into question the limits of politics of solidarity based on race.

However much ephemeral it seems and whatever hegemonic interests it seeks to serve, the identity of the Northeastern migrants is layered, situational and strategic. While the pan-identity exists alongside other tribal/ethnic/religious/regional identities, the utility of each of these is dependent on the socio-economic settings, for e.g., a migrant might use their general identity as a ‘Northeastern’ or ‘Mongoloid’ for a job interview in service industry and assert their tribal or ethnic identity to socialize in more informal settings such as church groups. The assertion of this

multi-layered Northeastern identity, on one end, claims to be different from the ‘mainland’ and, on the other, demand their inclusion and right to the metropolitan city. The pan-Northeastern solidarity, in turn, acts as strategic identity for counter-hegemonic protests against long-drawn systemic racism and security regime in the region and for collective bargaining in the neoliberal market. The migrants have come to accept and adopt their portrayal as look-alikes of Korean or Japanese people in order to get jobs in Korean cafés or Japanese restaurants. Besides ethnic items from their villages, Northeastern retail businesses also sell imported commodities from China, Thailand or Korea and locally produced products in Darjeeling and by Tibetan refugees.

Outro: Cosmopolitanism and Migrant Subjectivities

The neoliberal city, as the receiver of various shades and grades of migrant populations, offer different social groups different experiences of cosmopolitanism and grade them within the binary of desirability or undesirability. Cosmopolitanism is, therefore, a tendency of neoliberal capital to appropriate, commodify and control bodies and cultures of communities who come from diverse socio-economic and political backgrounds. As Craig Calhoun argues, “While cities can be places of creative disorder, jumbling together ethnicities, classes, and political projects, most people claim only familiar parts of the diversity on offer.”²³ As minorities, the cultures of migrants and refugees are condemned to the mere aesthetic consumption or spectatorship. Social groups, such as the ‘Mongoloid’ migrants from Northeast, whose bodies, cultural norms and practices are deemed profitable and aesthetic for global capital, multicultural politics and middle-class consumption practices are glorified as cosmopolitan. And groups whose presence are reminders of the unwanted remnants of old customs and traditions and are deemed ‘anti-cosmopolitan’, such as poor migrants from Bihar and West Bengal, are pushed to the un-aesthetic, un-cosmopolitan underbellies of the city such as squatter settlements (Datta 2011).

Cosmopolitanism is, therefore, a useful analytical lens to study the phenomenon of migration and the social, political and economic lives of those in movement. In case of Northeastern migrants, their representation and lived-experiences of cosmopolitanism brings to light their multifaceted and multi-layered subjectivities.

²³ Craig Calhoun, “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” (South Atlantic Quarterly, 2002), 888.



Photograph V (Date- 31st July,2022; Time- 5:20 PM):

Migrants gathered around a 'Laphing' stall in Humayunpur. 'Laphing' is a Tibetan snack that has become popular street food among young Northeastern migrants. Laphing is one of the medium and symbol of migrants' own cosmopolitan practices. It is representational of how the anthropological concept of 'Northeastern' has expanded to encompass other 'Mongoloid' migrants in the city with similar experiences of racial alienation such as migrants from Ladakh, Nepal, Tibet as well as Myanmar.

(Photo credit: Anasma Gayari)

The ‘un-Indian’ physical appeal and their ‘exotic’ cultures are valorised as enhancing the cosmopolitan aesthetic of the city, whether in the service industries or in their daily businesses in the urban villages. However, when the migrants observe these same cultural and traditional habits as a part of their own daily existence, it is viewed as a transgression of tradition and morality of the dominant communities. This cosmopolitanism is, thus, essentially a process of commodification of the migrants racial ‘otherness’ and their perceived hypersexuality which have led to their layered form of racial, sexual, physical and mental violence and oppression.

Furthermore, their own cosmopolitan practices in form of an emergent pan-Northeastern identity further reveals the complexities of their agency by strategically challenging their very objectification as cosmopolitan. The possibility of this new form of solidarity opens up the avenue for a new politics of belongingness, albeit with inherent limitations and contestations. As Calhoun further reminds, “If cosmopolitan democracy is to flourish and be fully open to human beings of diverse circumstances and identities, then it needs to disentangle itself from neoliberal capitalism. It needs to approach both cross-cultural relations and the construction of social solidarities with deeper recognition of the significance of diverse starting points and potential outcomes.”²⁴ Therefore, it is important for further researches to look into how these migrants as a racial minority interact, intermingle, clash or coexist with migrants of other races, regions or nationalities and the implications it has for the urban politics and economy.

²⁴ Calhoun, “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers,” 892

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