

Neoliberal Labour and Mobile Subjectivities: A Photo Essay on Labour from the Northeast in Urban Villages of Delhi

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This photo essay captures the interplay of multifaceted border-crossing and multilayered subjectivities of neoliberal service sector workers from the Northeast region of India in the urban villages of South Delhi. Since India's economic liberalization in the 1990s there has been a parallel phenomenon of acceleration in migration from the Northeast to other parts of the country, especially metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bengaluru, Bombay and Pune. According to a 2011 survey conducted by the North East Support Centre and Helpline (NESCH), an NGO for Northeastern migrants in Delhi-NCR, Delhi was the highest receiver of migrants from the region holding 48.21% of the total migrant population. Incipient studies on Northeastern migrants have suggested that there has been a marked rise in the visibility of racialized "Mongoloid" service workers in the new service sector of the metro-cities. Industries with global cosmopolitan orientation such as call centres, shopping malls, luxury hotels and up-market restaurants and cafés have a specific demand for their labour due to their un-Indian physical appeal and supposed English speaking skills. Through a selection of 15-20 photographs captured by the author, this paper seeks to critically investigate the ways in which the "Mongoloid" migrants make their way in the visual regime of differentiation in the neo-liberal labour market. This work constitutes a small part of an on-going ethnography on Northeastern migrants in Delhi for the author's PhD thesis. The larger implication of this paper is that visibility/invisibility in the literal sense can reveal critical knowledge on the interplay between global capitalism, neoliberal labour regime, migration control, citizenship, racialization and mobile subjectivities.

Keywords: Northeast India, neoliberal service sector, labour migration, race, urban villages

(Please scroll below for six sample photographs.)

Sample Photographs:

(All photographs were captured and edited by the author.)



Photograph 1: A Korean Skin Care and Cosmetics store in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave. The store is owned by three male business partners who are (in the words of the sales girl in attendance during the field work) “mainlanders- one from Rajasthan, one from Bihar and a Marwari from Gangtok.” The sales girl is from Manipur. Luxury and trendy stores selling imported commodities like these exist side by side ‘traditional’ shops such as the general grocery store pictured on the left. This juxtaposition captures the coexistence of global, regional and local and the peculiar/anomalous nature of Delhi’s *urban villages*.



Photograph II: A Korean Bubble Tea café in B6 Market, Safdarjung Enclave. Bubble tea or Boba drink is a beverage from Korea that has been popularized through social media by the global influence of Korean pop culture. The store is owned by four partners: two “mainlanders”, a Korean national and a young male Manipuri migrant. This not only showcases the cosmopolitan ties between local, regional and global, but also how a migrant from Northeast has made way into the global labour market and service industry through collaboration with local and global.



Photograph III: Reception counter inside the Korean Bubble Tea café in B6 Market, Safdarjung Enclave. Most of the employees are “Mongoloid” service workers from the Northeast. The clientele of this café is mostly young college crowd including Northeastern migrants themselves. This suggests that Northeastern migrants not only constitute the class of service providers but also consumers of the global service industries, indicating their multifaceted class positions, aspirations and subjectivities.



Photograph IV: A Tangkhul basic needs store in Humayunpur Safdarjung Enclave. The Tangkhuls are a tribal group mostly located in Manipur, India. The store sells vegetables, condiments, meat and other food items from Northeast that are not available or grown in Delhi, or North India in general. There are various such “North East” basic needs stores in urban villages where the migrant population is concentrated, leading to the emergence of the epithet “Northeast ghettos” for these urban villages. This is one of the practices of place-making by the migrants in the neoliberal cities as suggested by anthropologist Duncan McDuie-Ra. Notice the term “North East” in the second heading of the board. A Tangkhul store identifying with the Northeast suggests the emergence of a pan-Northeastern identity, one that was non-existent before the large scale out-migration from the region.



Photograph V: An image of a Korean brand sesame oil inside the Tangkhul basic needs store in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave. The store sells an assortment of imported Korean packed food, such as noodles, cookies, tea and dried seaweed, besides local “Northeastern” vegetables, pickles and other items.



Photograph VI: Northeastern migrants gathering in front of a Laphing stand in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave. Laphing is a snack from Tibet that has become a popular street food among Northeastern migrants. The food is a representation of how the anthropological concept of “Northeastern” has expanded to encompass other apparently “Mongoloid” migrants in the city such as migrants from Ladakh, Nepal, Tibet as well as Myanmar. This also suggests the possibility of a racial limitation of the concept of the “Northeast.”