

(First Full Draft)

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

(Module B: Globalisation and Migrant Economy  
with Special Focus on Labour and Platform Economy)

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This photo essay captures the interface of globalization, capitalism and migrant labour and the implications it has on the identity and subjectivities of service sector workers from the Northeast region of India in the urban villages of South Delhi. Through a selection of 16 photographs, this paper seeks to critically investigate the ways in which the migrants, who are ostensibly otherized through racialization, make their way in the visual regime of differentiation in the neoliberal labour market. The two sites of urban villages selected for this essay are – *Munirka village* and *Humayunpur*. Both of these urban villages

are located in South Delhi and have been prominent residential areas of migrants from the Northeast region of India.

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 (McDuie-Ra 2012).

Scholars who made important academic interventions on migrants from the Northeast have argued that there has been a marked rise in the visibility of young racialized 'Mongoloid' service workers from the frontier in the neoliberal service sector of the cities (McDuie-Ra 2012, Kikon and Karlsson 2019, Haksar 2016). Service 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. Colonial as well as postcolonial policies and practices have kept the region,

geopolitically demarcated as the Northeast, its politics, economy and culture at a distance, if not in isolation, from what is known in juxtaposition as the Indian ‘mainland’ (Baruah 2021, Baruah 2013). Consequently, the ‘Mongoloid’ face, which consists mainly of yellowish skin tone, epicanthic fold or slanted eyes, predominantly found among the natives of the Northeast have not figured in the hegemonic imagination of the ‘Indian face’ (Wouters and Subba 2013). Their exclusion from this hegemonic ‘Indian’ phenotypical identity and their misrecognition as Chinese, East Asian, Korean, South East Asian, etc., in other words ‘un-Indian’, is precisely what has enabled their inclusion in the new global affective economy.

Their inclusion/visibility in the service economy has, however, not easily translated to inclusion/visibility in the political and social spaces of the city. This presents a reversal of the case of economic exclusion-political inclusion of other migrant labour in the city, especially those from the Hindi heartland. As scholars from the Calcutta Research Group have argued in their latest works (Bandyopadhyaya, Banerjee and Samaddar 2022, Samaddar 2020), the visual phenomenon of mobility or the spectacle of migrants returning home has “enabled the footloose labouring subject to emerge in the political sphere as a subject

during the Covid-19 lockdown in India- literally crashing through the invisibility of labour in bourgeois political order” (Samaddar 2021, 250) . The same has perhaps not been true in the case of migrant workers from the Northeast. The same Covid-19 lockdown saw several incidents of discrimination and denial of rights of Northeastern migrants in different cities of India. They were reportedly being kicked out of their rented rooms/apartments, denied access to essential spaces like grocery shops and public transportations, and physically and verbally violated, all on the mere pretext of having ‘Mongoloid’ feature and looking ‘un-Indian’ (Kipgen 2020). While their supposed cosmopolitan appeal is said to have created a niche for them in the new service economy, yet outside the spaces they continue to be considered as outsiders and a racial hostility towards them still looms large.

The argument that I try to present through an ensemble of 16 photographs is that in order to make way and survive in racially differentiated spaces of economy and society the migrants negotiate through multifaceted border-crossing and multilayered subjectivities. According to Kikon and Karlsson, the migration of the youth from the Northeast “does not involve the crossing of any international borders, yet, both geographically and

culturally, it is a movement into a very different place” (Kikon and Karlsson 2019, 6-7). I add that the movement of the racially differentiated migrants also entail a second level of migration or border crossing. In order to be employable in the affective industries, the migrants have to pose or perform a foreign identity through ‘virtual’ or ‘affective border crossing.’ In order to provide their services to clients located in the Western countries (in the case of call centres) or to the Indian clients who desire the experience of a foreign culture (in restaurants and cafés in up-market localities, shopping malls, luxury hotels and so on), the migrants have to play along with their apparent ‘un-Indianness.’ In this process their ‘otherization’ is commodified and has, thus, become a part of their commodified selves. In the photographs I attempt to show not only the cases of migrants who are employed in Chinese restaurants or Korean cafés and boutiques, but also migrants who have utilized this ‘un-Indian’/ ‘East Asian’ trope to make way into global capitalism by setting up their own Korean cafés, Tibetan snack food stall, or selling imported Chinese or Thai products in their shops in the urban villages of Delhi. This self-commodification has also opened up opportunities for their collaboration with the local as well as international business interests. The implications this has on the

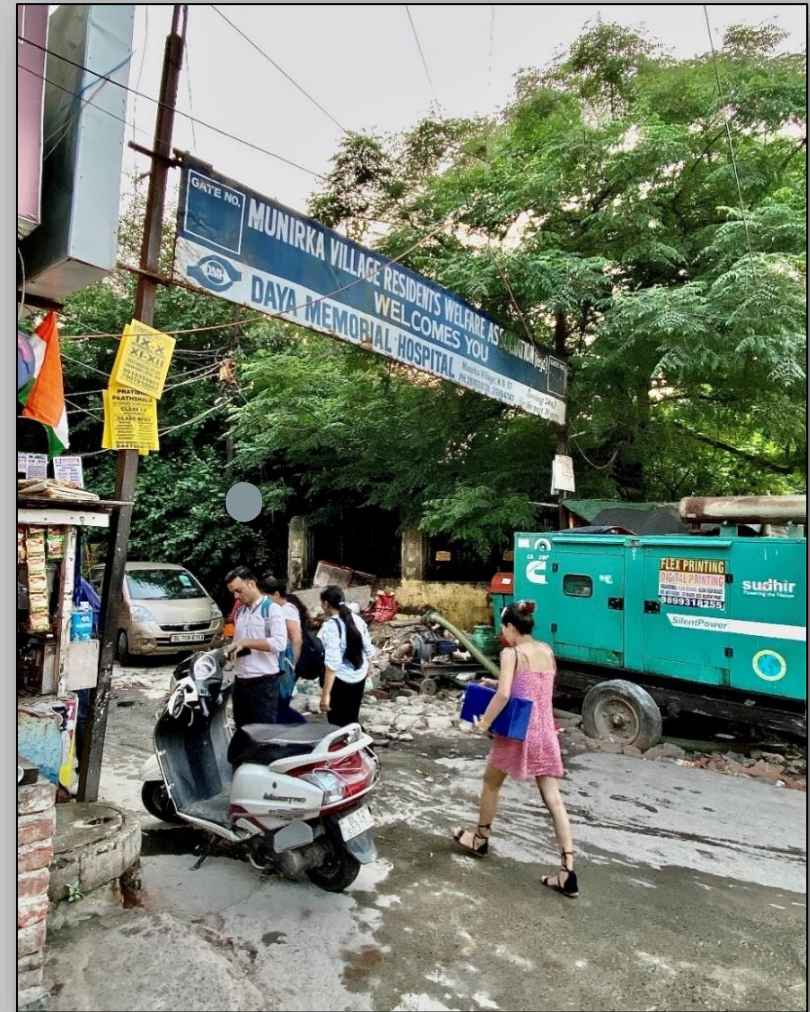
possibility of collaboration with local and international political interests is what remains to be seen. Thus, the management of self or selfhood in the new labour regime, especially in the service sector is perhaps as equally pervasive and despotic as the currently hegemonic system of algorithmic management. 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, discipline of migrants and refugees, citizenship, racialization and mobile subjectivities.

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

(Photo Credits: Esther Lalneikimi Darlong and Anasma Gayari)

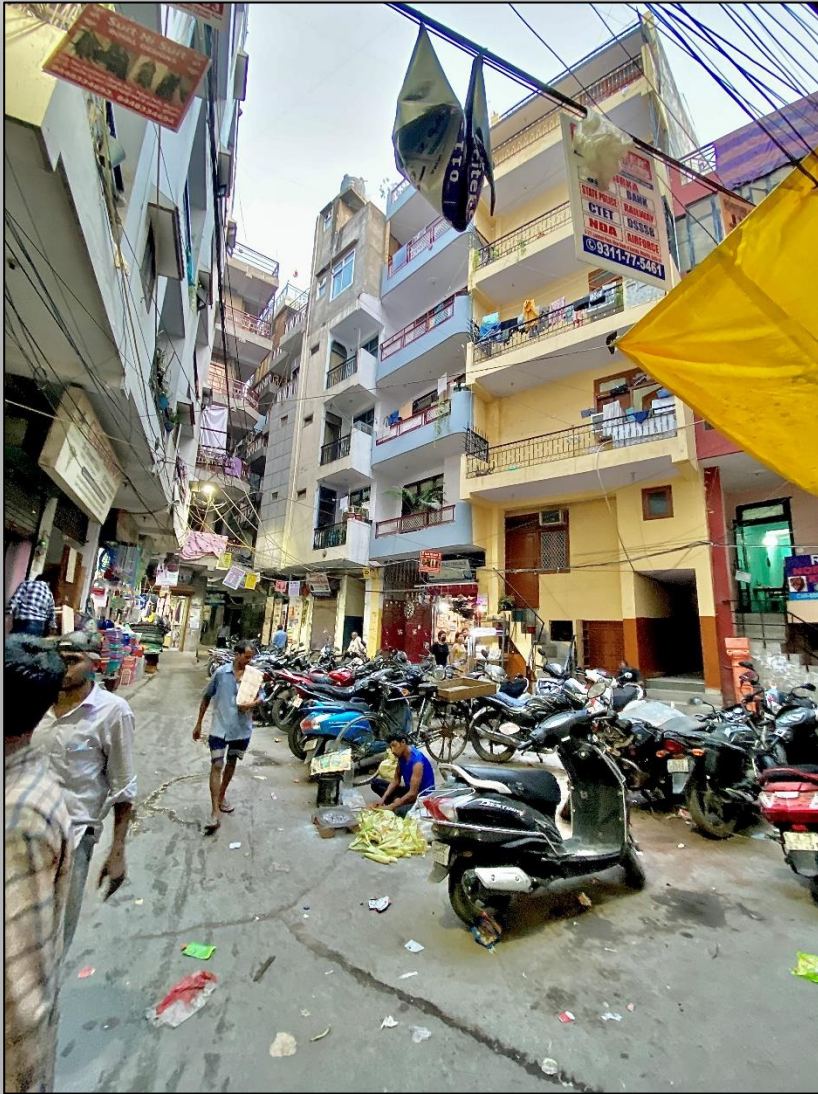
### ***Urban Village: An Oxymoron***

Delhi is dotted with some 135 urban villages that are dominated by Jat and Gujjar communities. They are erstwhile agricultural settlements that were exempted from the first Master Plan of Delhi (1962). Earmarked by ‘lal dora’ or red chord (which is why these urban villages are also known as *lal doras*), they were excluded from the urban infrastructural network of Delhi which led to their haphazard and unrestrained growth, thereby giving them the look of neither city nor village (Chattopadhyay, Dey and Joel 2014). On the face of the entry of private international capital, global consumer culture, real-estate projects and gated communities, the urban villages have managed to preserve rural institutions, kinship-based networks and vernacular forms of capitalism (Pati 2022).



Photograph 1 [Date & Time: 13th August, 2022; 6:34 PM]

**Entrance gate of Munirka Village.**



*Photograph II [Date & Time: 13th August, 2022; 6:48 PM]*

**A parking lot for two wheelers 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 indications of absence of urban planning or civic utilities in the urban villages. Panchayat systems exists under the name of Resident Welfare Associations which oversteps its usual function of facilitating public amenities. The role of the village elders, who at most times are patriarchs, are upheld in organising socio-cultural events such as weddings as well as in mediating property feuds (Pati 2022).

Due to the unbridled growth of buildings and apartments and comparatively cheap accommodation than the more developed parts of the city, urban villages such as Munirka have become home to lower income groups and working-class migrants, especially from the Northeast, who constitute the mass of service providers in the neoliberal economy.

### *Living Cheek by Jowl*

An accelerated migration from the Northeastern region of India and the proliferated growth of neoliberal service economy has brought a drastic shift in the demographic makeup of the urban villages of Delhi. In the blink of last two decades, they have now turned into popular ‘ghettoes’ for Northeastern migrants who work in the city’s service sector. The shock of close proximity between racially and culturally differentiated communities and North Indian communities such as Jats and Gujjars has created a constant environment of anxiety and tension between the villagers and the migrants. The local communities’ attempt to control and regulate the migrants’ food culture, dressing habits and lifestyle has often escalated into racial and sexual forms of violence against the migrants. In 2005 the Delhi Police had issued a controversially racist pamphlet that contained “Security tips for North East students/visitors in Delhi” (McDuaie-Ra 2012, 101). The pamphlet had tone-deaf injunctions on what not to cook and how to cook (e.g.: to avoid preparing “smelly food” like bamboo shoots and *axone* or fermented soyabean, “without creating ruckus in the neighbourhood”) and how to dress (e.g.: not to wear “revealing” dresses, to “dress according to the sensitivity of the local populace”, etc.).



Photograph III [Date & Time: 1st September, 2022; 7:37 PM]

**A narrow alleyway in Humayunpur Village.**



*Photograph IV [Date & Time: 1st September, 2022; 5:55 PM]*

**A property broker shop in Humayunpur Village that caters to Northeastern migrants.**

The M. P. Bezbaruah Committee, formed by the Home Ministry of India in 2014 after the murder of a student from Arunachal Pradesh, attempted to address the issues faced by the migrants by underplaying it as a problem of cultural gap rather than that of racism, which is essentially discrimination based on physical traits (Bora 2019).

While the shared sense of insecurity and alienation impelled the migrants to live together in the urban ghettos, the ability to extract higher rents from Northeastern migrants than others through racial intimidation is why the landlords seem to prefer them as tenants. Paradoxically, the ethnocentric dietary and sartorial policing of the migrants all comes apart when it comes to profiting from Northeastern businesses in the urban villages. These very localities have throngs of Northeast restaurants, groceries and garment shops in the very buildings where the locals and migrants cohabit. Many young entrepreneurs from the region have ventured into setting up small scale businesses and retail shops which confer upon these urban villages a perfunctory cosmopolitan appeal by attracting young consumers and clientele from posh neighbourhoods such as Vasant Kunj and Defence Colony.





Photograph VI [Date & Time: 1st September, 2022; 7:43 PM]

Signboard of a Manipuri cuisine restaurant in Humayunpur Village.



Photograph V (Date & Time: 13th August, 2022; 6:42 PM)

A shop for Delhi to Manipur courier service in Munirka village.



Photograph VII [Date & Time: 1st September, 2022; 7:42 PM]

Northeastern shops in Humayunpur Village.



*Photograph VIII (Date & Time: 31st July, 2022; 5:11 PM)*

**A Korean Skin Care and Cosmetics store in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave.**

The Korean Skin Care and Cosmetics store pictured on the left 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, Sikkim.” The sales girl was from Manipur.

Both men and women from the Northeast are in high demand in the neoliberal service sector because of “their oriental looks and knowledge of English”, “a reputation for sincerity and reliability” and their readiness “to work for less remuneration” (Bezbaruah Committee 2014, 11). Therefore, the very same physical appearance and sartorial styles enable their entry into the global service labour market that disable their cultural rights and freedom of mobility in the city.

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 unique political economy of Delhi’s urban villages.

### *The Visibility/ Invisibility of Women in Urban Villages*

Patriarchal control over women is predominant in the urban villages. Women have little mobility and are usually prohibited from participating in the panchayats or Resident Welfare Association meetings (Pati 2022). While the presence of women of Jat and Gujjar communities in the urban villages is invisible, the presence of Northeastern women can be said to be hyper-visible. The young racialized women who work at odd hours as service workers, are seen without male chaperones and embody modern lifestyle, seemingly transgressing Indian middle-class female respectability, produce anxieties over the patriarchal status quo of the villages. They are perceived as being loose, sexually promiscuous and licentious in character that has made them susceptible to sexual violence. According to a survey conducted by Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, that began in 2012, about 81% of women from the Northeast faced various forms of harassment in Delhi which included harassment by landlords, verbal abuse, heckling and molestation (Gohain 2014).



*Photograph IX [Date & Time: 13th August, 2022; 6:57 PM]*

**A narrow alleyway puddled with rain water in Munirka village.**



*Photograph X (Date & Time: 13th August, 2022; 6:35 PM)*

**A Northeast wholesale-groceries shop in Munirka Village.**

**The owners are a married couple - a North Indian man and a Northeastern woman belonging to Kuki tribe.**

As much as they are racially fetishized in the global service economy, the women from the Northeast are also fetishized as objects of desire by the men in the urban villages. In the movie titled *Axone* (2019), a fictional story about a group of Northeastern tenants in Delhi, the Punjabi landlord's son is shown to be desiring for a Northeastern girlfriend for “time pass” (Kharkongor 2019).

This arbitrary hyper-sexualization and fetishization as desirable/repulsive has also created anxieties over patriarchal control back home. This has, in turn, led to harsher moral policing of Northeastern women by their own community elders and ethnic associations that exist in the city. They are often advised against working in aviation or call centres where working hours are unpredictable and are strictly warned against marrying outside their community.



Photograph XI (Date & Time: 31st July, 2022; 4:35 PM)

**A Korean Boba Drink café in B6 Market, Safdarjung Enclave.**

### *Making way in the global labour economy*

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.

Most of the employees are ‘Mongoloid’ service workers from the Northeast. The clientele of this café is mostly young college-going 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 economy, indicating their multifaceted class positions, aspirations and subjectivities.

### *An emerging pan Northeastern identity*

The Tangkhul store pictured on the right 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 the urban villages that has contributed to the emergence of the epithet of ‘Northeast ghettos’ for these settlements. This is one of the practices of place-making by the migrants in the neoliberal cities (McDuié-Ra 2012). 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. Several scholars have contested to the reality of this pan identity on the ground that the contemporary history of Northeast is rife with ethnic conflicts and violence (Haokip 2012, Thounaojam 2012). This pan-Northeastern identity is utilised not only as a source of regional support and solidarity away from home but also of strategic navigation in the labour market as well as the urban villages.



*Photograph XII (Date & Time: 31st July, 2022; 5:00 PM)*

**A Tangkhul basic needs store in Humayunpur Safdarjung Enclave. The Tangkhuls are a tribal group mostly located in the state of Manipur.**



*Photograph XIII (Date & Time: 31st July, 2022; 5:20 PM)*

**Northeastern migrants gathering in front of a Laphing stall in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave.**

### *Cross border identity*

Laphing is a snack from Tibet that has become a popular street food among Northeastern migrants. The laphing stall pictured on the left is run by young Chakma men from Mizoram. The food is a representation 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. While the construction includes other 'Mongoloid' migrants outside the region, it also excludes the 'non-Mongoloid' migrants such as Assamese and Bengalis who belong to the region.



Photograph XV (Date & Time: 3rd August, 2022; 8:00 PM)

Chilli pickle made by Tibetan Refugees being sold at a Northeastern grocery shop in Munirka village.



Photograph XIV (Date & Time: 31st July, 2022; 5:00 PM)

An image of a Korean brand sesame oil inside the Tangkhul basic needs store in Humayunpur, Safdarjung Enclave.





*Photograph XVI (Date & Time: 3rd August, 2022; 8:14 PM)*

**Migrant children playing in an alleyway in Munirka village.**

This photo essay has thus far attempted to showcase the interplay of globalization, capitalism and migration and its implications on the subjectivities of racialized migrant labour from the Northeast. While the experiences of the Northeastern migrants are spatially situated- they enjoy an advantage as preferred service workers, yet face racial hostility from the locals- they are also deeply gendered. In order to make way in the neoliberal labour market and the neoliberal city, migrants have to constantly engage in a strategic negotiation with their own identities, at local, regional and global levels, thereby leading to the phenomenon of mobility of subjectivities.

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