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Beyond the 'Exclusionary City': North-east Migrants in Neo-liberal Delhi

Duncan McDuie-Ra

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Abstract

Scholars have noted the ways in which Delhi's transformation into a global city has enclosed urban spaces excluding the urban poor, labourers and migrants. One of the neglected aspects of this focus is the way in which Delhi's transformation has created new opportunities for migrants from north-east India. This article is an ethnographic account of migrants from the north-east in Delhi. It is argued that employment opportunities in the neo-liberal spaces of the global city are fuelling a rapid increase in migration from the north-east, the very limit of India's geographical and cultural imaginary. Outside these spaces of economic inclusion, north-east migrants continue to live as exceptional citizens and experience racism, discrimination and violence. The experiences of north-east migrants in Delhi suggest that the exclusionary city narrative is an incomplete view of urban change in India, and reveal how neo-liberal transformation is connecting heartland cities to frontier regions in ways previously unimagined.

Introduction

India's embrace of neo-liberalism has had a profound impact on urban areas. The drive to transform Delhi into a global city has been critiqued for reorganising, sanitising and enclosing urban spaces, excluding the urban poor, labourers and migrants (see Baviskar, 2003; Chaplin, 2011; Dupont, 2011; Rao, 2010). One of the neglected aspects of this focus on exclusion is the ways in which the new spaces created by Delhi's transformation have created new opportunities for different

groups. One such group are migrants from north-east India—the very limit of India's geographical and cultural imaginary. This article is an ethnographic account of migrants from the north-east in Delhi. Migration from the north-east to Delhi has increased dramatically in the past half-decade. I argue that the experiences of north-east migrants in Delhi suggest that the exclusionary city narrative is an incomplete view of urban change in India. The so-called neo-liberal transformation of

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Delhi has created jobs in retail, hospitality and call centres—employment coveted by north-east migrants. Further, employers in these sectors desire migrant labour from the north-east in particular, targeting their distinct appearance and their English language skills. These changes link the north-east frontier to India's heartland cities in ways that were unimaginable a generation ago. Despite these opportunities, north-east migrants experience a number of challenges in Delhi, some of which mirror the experiences of other migrants and others that are particular to ethnic minorities from the north-east. These challenges are less a product of the neo-liberal spaces of the city and more a remnant of embedded stereotypes towards ethnic and tribal communities from the north-east frontier.

This article is the result of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Delhi from December 2010 to February 2011 and again in December 2011. It also builds upon eight years of ethnographic research in the north-east itself. Delhi was chosen because it has the largest community of north-east migrants and the migrant community is more diverse in terms of its ethnic and socioeconomic origins. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted with migrants from all parts of the north-east, but was more concentrated among migrants from the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. This is partially explained by higher numbers of migrants from these states and because I began with contacts from these states and through snowball sampling I met other members of their networks predicated on family, clan and ethnic ties. During fieldwork, I lived in a north-east migrant neighbourhood, Humayanpur, in south Delhi. I conducted interviews and conversations with north-east migrants throughout the city in places where they live, work and study.

Initially, I attempted to conduct formal interviews; however, most north-east migrants were uncomfortable with this method and many said that they did not have anything important to say. Respondents were much more open to informal conversations. I had conversations with north-east migrants every day for almost three months and during a shorter follow-up visit. Some of these conversations were brief. On a university campus, I would meet a north-east migrant and ask where they are from, what they are doing in Delhi and how they find it. That could take a few minutes and we might never meet again. Other migrants I saw almost every day. In north-east neighbourhoods, we would talk while passing in the street, while cooking, or when I went to their flat in the evenings and thus, after three months, we ended up talking for many hours. There were all manner of interactions in between these extremes. All of the respondents mentioned in this article have been given pseudonyms.

This article has four sections. The first section reviews the 'exclusionary city' narrative present in critical accounts of Delhi's neo-liberal transformation. The second section discusses push and pull factors leading north-east migrants to Delhi. The third section analyses the challenges faced by north-east migrants in Delhi. The concluding section discusses the ways in which north-east migration complicates the 'exclusionary city' narrative and suggests new ways of thinking about the links between frontier and heartland.

The Exclusionary City

The liberalisation of India's economy from the late 1980s (officially since 1991) has transformed urban areas through the privatisation and enclosure of urban spaces, the creation of investment-friendly infrastructure and the partial privatisation of governance and welfare

(Baviskar, 2003; Chaplin, 2011; Lama-Rewal, 2011). David Harvey defines neo-liberalism as

a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005, p. 2).

Neo-liberalism is regularly identified at the heart of India's urban transformation, although in the literature neo-liberalism is often used interchangeably with liberalisation to describe the same phenomena.

Neo-liberalism takes on a variety of national and sub-national forms. In the case of India this has necessitated a shift from the role of the state as provider under Nehruvian socialism, to the role of the state as a champion for private investment and market penetration. The role of the state in this process is varied at the federal and local levels, and in different sectors of the economy and society (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). Transformation is constant in urban India and, as Gooptu (2011) warns, many of the processes attributed to neo-liberalism are not necessarily unique to the past two decades but take on a distinctive character under neo-liberalism. For Gooptu (2011, p. 38) distinctiveness can be seen in the creation of 'entrepreneurial cities' to trigger economic growth, with dramatic consequences for the reorganisation of urban space and the capture of urban politics by the middle classes. Neo-liberal transformation in Delhi is partial and diverse spaces co-exist and overlap; it is what Kudva (2009, p. 1615) refers to as a "patchwork of deeply segregated localities". Attempts to transform the city are driven by the desire to fashion a 'global city', set out explicitly in the Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) *Master*

Plan for Delhi 2021, released in 2007 (Dupont, 2011, p. 533).

The global city aspiration has necessitated a shift in urban logic. Construction that is 'planned' is afforded legitimacy, whereas construction that is 'unplanned' can be deemed illegitimate and subject to demolition (Ghertner, 2011). Bhan (2009, p. 128) estimates that 45 000 homes in Delhi were demolished between 2004 and 2007, reflecting a shift in "how the urban poor in India are represented, governed and judged" (p. 131). Bhan argues that the rights of Delhi's poor are eroded by the targeting of 'encroachers', seen as improper citizens of the city (p.139). The poor, including the working poor, are seen as threats to the sanitised spaces of the global city. Key to this rationale is the creation of exclusionary spaces: gated neighbourhoods, restricted-entry shopping malls and restricted-entry parks and green spaces. Waldrop argues that such spaces reflect anxiety derived from the perceived crumbling of old caste and class boundaries and the need to "re-establish a sense of order" (Waldrop, 2004, p. 99). Fernandes calls this "the spatial reconfiguration of class inequalities" part of a larger phenomenon of the "politics of forgetting" wherein "marginalized social groups are rendered invisible and forgotten within the dominant national political culture" (Fernandes, 2004, p. 2416).

Citizen participation in the city's governance is altering the locus of political power. The most notable change is the Bhagidari initiative, begun in 2000, which formalises citizen-government partnership and deliberation on local issues through Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs). Critics of Bhagidari argue that RWAs have become a vehicle for narrow middle-class interests, effectively hijacking the governance agenda and directly and indirectly affecting the urban poor (Chakrabarti,

2009). Harriss (2005) argues that RWAs promote an associational life that appeals to the middle classes, whereas the urban poor are much more likely to address problems through political mediation. As Kundu argues, RWAs are working in partnership with the DDA, the Delhi Police and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi to “sanitise their neighbourhood by trying to remove encroachments and petty commercial establishments” (Kundu, 2011, p. 24). The end result is exclusion.

Considering Harvey’s (2003) paradigmatic ruminations on the ‘right to city’ as rights of access and rights to transform the urban environment, Delhi is failing the poor and migrants on both counts as urban space is sanitised, pushing the poor further into the margins, and participation in increasingly formalised local associations is captured by middle- and upper-class interests. Where do north-east migrants fit into this picture? As will be seen, the neo-liberal transformation of Delhi is creating opportunities for north-east migrants in the spaces of global capital.

North-east Migrants in Delhi

Studies of urban exclusion have rarely asked whether the neo-liberal transformation of cities can include groups that have been historically marginalised or that have had little engagement with large cities. North-east migrants are one such group. The north-east refers to the area of land between Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, which contains eight federal states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is almost completely cut off from the rest of India, joined only by a narrow corridor of land between the borders of Nepal and Bangladesh. The region contains steep hill and mountain

areas around two large river valleys, the Barak and Brahmaputra (Assam), and the smaller Imphal valley (Manipur). A large proportion of the population traces their linguistic heritage to Mon-Khmer, Tai and Tibeto-Burman peoples (Cordaux *et al.*, 2004). Several of these groups are categorised as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ in India and make up the majority of the population in four out of eight of the federal states in the region (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland) and large minority populations in the other four states. Christianity, Animism and Buddhism are common in the hill areas and Vaishnavite Hinduism and Islam are more common in the valleys.

Much of the region has been characterised by armed insurgency and counter-insurgency for the past six decades. Insurgent activity has been in the pursuit of separatist demands and for ethnically exclusive homelands (Baruah, 2003). While India contains diverse regions and peoples and a coherent national society is not always identifiable, there is a distance between the north-east and the rest of India that is qualitatively different from that between other regions and peoples in India. There is a strong belief in both the Indian ‘mainland’ and in the north-east that the different states, autonomous units and peoples grouped together as ‘the north-east’ will never be able to be part of India in the same ways as other diverse groups of peoples have been accommodated. This belief is enacted in the ways the region is governed (Baruah, 2005). Exceptionalism allows democracy to be suspended permanently and the peoples of the region to be under permanent surveillance. It also means that laws, norms and government practices that would be unacceptable in other parts of India are accepted and often unchallenged (McDuié-Ra, 2009).

Since the mid 2000s, more migrants have been leaving the north-east than ever before, yet research into migration out of the north-east is scarce. Scholars have long focused on migration *into* the region, from other parts of India and neighbouring countries, seen as fuelling ethno-nationalist politics and insurgency (Bhaumik, 2009; Hazarika, 2000; Singh, 1987). Migration from the north-east to Delhi has taken place since Indian Independence, yet given the distance between the north-east and Delhi most tribal migrants moving to urban areas chose towns in their own tribal areas or within the north-east region. Historically, those migrating outside the region went to cities much closer to the frontier, including Kolkata and Siliguri in West Bengal. Those who travelled to Delhi were there to learn the tools of the Indian bureaucracy and for tertiary education. With the top universities in the country and also the top preparatory courses for taking the Indian Administrative Services (civil service) exams, Delhi attracted the wealthy, connected and educated from the north-east. This group of migrants continues to come to Delhi, but the dramatic growth of migrants from other backgrounds in the past decade is most relevant to this article.

As migration to Delhi is internal and as most tribal migrants do not own property or a business, or vote in Delhi, their population is not accurately recorded. Recent survey data from the North East Support Centre and Helpline put the number of north-east migrants in Delhi at approximately 200 000 people and this accounts for 48.21 per cent of the total population of north-east migrants in Indian cities (NESCH, 2011, p. 10). The same report notes that the number of north-east migrants has increased 12 times between 2005 and 2011 (p. 10). However, the scope of these data are limited and they are likely to be an underestimate. Most migrants

come to Delhi in their 20s and migrate without their parents—although from fieldwork it is clear that there is an increase in families migrating to Delhi together, especially from areas affected by armed conflict, such as Manipur.

During fieldwork, migrants gave a number of reasons for leaving the north-east including seeking refuge from conflict, changing attitudes towards India and increased connectivity between the frontier and the city. However, most migrants discussed the availability of work in retail, hospitality and call centres as the primary reason. Job opportunities in the north-east are limited by insurgency and by a number of associated difficulties such as corruption, low levels of investment, capital flight and the proliferation of illegal and semi-legal economies. Alongside work, the opportunity to study outside the region is a major impetus for migration. The availability of work means that migrants from the north-east can support themselves during study, or support family members to study. Education is sought after to gain an edge in labour markets back in the north-east, especially in the public sector, and to meet changing aspirations and consumer desires. Furthermore, as north-east migrants have begun to create a niche in certain labour markets in cities, labour recruiters are travelling to the north-east to offer jobs in call centres, restaurants, hotels and spas. The following section focuses on the experiences of north-east migrants working in Delhi.

Economic Opportunities

North-east migrants are conspicuous in two main sectors of the urban economy broadly associated with Indian's embrace of neo-liberalism: new consumer spaces; and, call centres.

New Consumer Spaces

In Delhi, new consumer spaces are typified by up-market shopping malls resembling other ubiquitous, though amorphous, global spaces. This is not to say that they are bereft of national or local character, on the contrary, global spaces in India have distinct characteristics (Mathur, 2010). As Brosius' study of consumerism in Delhi has shown, at the heart of India's malls is the desire of the upper and aspiring middle classes to "live abroad in India" (Brosius, 2010, p. 65). It is in these spaces that many north-east migrants find work. During fieldwork, I concentrated on three inter-linked malls in Vasant Kunj, a suburb in south Delhi: the Ambience Mall, the DLF Promenade and the DLF Emporio, marketed as Delhi's 'most exclusive' malls with almost 300 stores. The malls are owned and operated by the Indian firm DLF Ltd, a real estate firm described by Srivastava as using construction projects in Delhi "for expressions of numerous ideologies of modernity and community life." (Srivastava, 2009, p. 338)

During fieldwork, I visited these malls over 20 times at different times of the day and on different days of the week to converse with north-east migrants. I also met north-east migrants working in these malls at other sites, including north-east neighbourhoods and university campuses. North-east migrants find work in clothing stores, sports stores, spas and cosmetic stores. They were especially well represented in stores that project a global brand image: Adidas, Benetton, Esprit, Levis, Nike and Zara. In restaurants within shopping malls, north-east men and women worked as waiters/waitresses and as *mâitres d'hôtel*, as well as in kitchens. Women are cast in highly sexualised roles, particularly in fashion stores, restaurants and spas. The body is emphasised in tight clothes, heavy eye

make-up and lipstick. The masculinity of tribal men is less clearly defined, although in some stores their bodies are emphasised through dress projecting athleticism and street fashion sense. 'Exotic' facial features are emphasised by exotic dress. In some restaurants and spas, women were dressed in *cheongsams*, the tight-fitting Chinese evening dress. In others, they wear a pastiche of East Asian clothing, although in other cases, emphasising body shape is less important than portraying exotica. In more expensive Korean restaurants, I have met Naga waitresses wearing *hanbok*, a flowing traditional dress that hides body shape. In an upscale Himalayan restaurant, they wear *bakhu*, a Bhutia/Tibetan tunic with a long dress and a silk *honju* (blouse) underneath. Many of these women are not from the Himalayas, but from Manipur and Nagaland. The highly orientalist labour force constructs a space that is in Delhi but not of Delhi; perfect for 'world-class' aspirants of the middle classes. As Zana, a 23-year-old male migrant from Nagaland put it, "for Indians it is like going to Bangkok for shopping. We look the same but some of us can speak Hindi".

Many respondents felt their race was utilised to portray an exotic and/or global aesthetic in these occupations. Some were uncomfortable with this; others saw it as a way to maintain an advantage over other job seekers from elsewhere in India. North-east migrants working in malls and restaurants expressed a number of reasons for pursuing this kind of employment. Some work in order to pay for their education, some for their siblings' education; some send their earnings back home; some are working to stay in Delhi and seek refuge from conflict; and others work to set themselves up to travel abroad. Ben, a 19-year-old male from Haflong, a town in the Cachar Hills district of Assam, worked as a *concierge* in one of the malls. He came to Delhi at age 17 to find work. After two years, he found his present

job at the mall after working in a restaurant kitchen. Dressed in a bellhop's outfit, his main duties were to give directions to consumers and to tell people not to take photographs inside. He found the job boring, but liked working in enclosed space away from the dust, the rain, the cold winter and the hot summer. He wants to go back home but he is not sure what he would do there, so for now he stays. Chon, a woman from the Naga areas of Manipur, works in a global chain restaurant inside a mall. She came to Delhi at age 18 to work and had been there for two years. She got her present job through her flatmate, also from Manipur, and she had since secured jobs for other friends. During one of my visits to the restaurant, all the friends were working a shift together, speaking in Thangkhul dialect in front of oblivious diners. Chon found the work fine, but as the restaurant closed after midnight she did not like travelling home late. She misses Manipur but feels better off than she would be back home.

For some migrants, working in malls was better than their previous jobs in Delhi and back home; they were paid more, it was clean and quiet, they were shielded from harassment and several respondents were proud to work in such a 'fancy' place. A few respondents mentioned that the *clientele* in the malls were easier to deal with than in other shops and restaurants they had worked in previously. Others seemed conscious of their disproportionate representation in malls as opposed to any other areas of life in Delhi. However, the most criticisms of mall labour came from north-east migrants who were not working in malls but witnessing the phenomenon through friends, relatives and neighbours. Achi, a woman from Manipur working as a professional in Delhi for 10 years, commented that north-east migrants have come to be servants of the "wealthy and sophisticated". She said that this is creating aspirations

among tribal migrants that life back at home cannot fulfil and she worries that few will return. Zana from Nagaland argued that north-easterners work in these malls but cannot afford to shop there, so they are becoming viewed as a race of shop assistants and waiters. This makes it easier for them to get work in these types of jobs, but harder for them to be taken seriously in other professions or in their studies.

Yet not all respondents see their conspicuous representation in these jobs as solely based on race. Many respondents pointed out that employment in clothing stores is related to the reputation north-easterners have for fashion. In fact, a key component of ethnic and pan-north-east identities is fashion sense. Reflective of this view, in a feature article in the Delhi-issued *Motherland* magazine entitled 'Paris, Milan, Dimapur' (a city in Nagaland), the author discusses the ways in which rejection of Indian dress, openness to Western, Korean and Japanese styles, and access to goods made in South-east Asia have converged among north-east youth, giving them a reputation as 'fashion obsessed' and ahead of the rest of India in cutting-edge style (Merelli, 2011, pp. 21–23). Fashion blogs by north-easterners abound, as do fashion magazines published in various north-east languages, such as *Lunglen*, a glossy Mizo fashion monthly. Fashion shows, beauty contests and local versions of *American Idol* (*Manipur Idol*, *Mizo Idol* and *Naga Idol*) have become staples of life in the frontier. North-eastern performers have also fared well in national music competitions, including *Indian Idol* (Prashant Tamang from Darjeeling won in 2007; Sourabhee Debbarma from Tripura won in 2009; and Amit Paul from Meghalaya was a runner-up in 2007); and the Naga band Divine Intervention won MTV India's *Rock On 2010* competition. Add this to the presence of north-east men and women in fashion

boutiques, spas and restaurants in cities throughout India and it appears that ethnic subjectivity is being re-placed in a new space. The portrayal of the fashionable and urbane north-easterner is a notable shift from the exotic pre-modern frontier-dweller or the violent separatist bent on destroying India (see Kikon, 2009).

Call Centres

The neo-liberal transformation of Delhi has resulted in a shift from manufacturing and heavy industry to the services sector. In response to pressure to 'clean up' the city in the 1980s and 1990s, coming from what Baviskar (2003) refers to as the diffusion of 'bourgeois environmentalism' among the middle and upper classes, the Supreme Court ordered the relocation of polluting industries outside residential areas (Rosencranz and Jackson, 2003). This was followed by the pursuit of foreign investment in the services sector and the powerful DDA has worked to appropriate land and make it available to developers courting foreign capital. As Dupont demonstrates, Delhi ranked first in cumulative foreign direct investment flows in India from 2000 to 2005 (Dupont, 2011, pp. 540–541). Investment has benefitted the services sector, especially special economic zones. Delhi and the National Capital Territory area have had 72 such zones approved since 2005 and these are concentrated in Gurgaon and Noida, satellite cities that have stretched the reach of the Delhi government into neighbouring states (Dupont, 2011, p. 541). Gurgaon and Noida are the home of Delhi's call centres, which depend upon access to a relatively low-cost labour force and one that is well educated and fluent in English (Taylor and Bain, 2005).

Literature on call centres in India has identified the various tactics adopted to

"de-Indianise" the accents and personalities of the labour force (Taylor and Bain, 2005, p. 278). Mirchandani's (2004) research in Delhi's call centres serving North American voice-to-voice clients is instructive. Workers are trained to 'neutralise' their accents and call monitoring, scripting, and 'locational masking', as in hiding the fact that the call centre worker is located in India, are all crucial components of call centre work. This has advantages for north-east migrants. Most north-easterners from the hill areas attend English medium schooling and literacy rates in hill areas are very high (Government of India, 2002). English is the *lingua franca* between different ethnic groups. There are other factors affecting language in different parts of the north-east: for example, Hindi is banned in Manipur as a result of ethno-nationalist campaigns to restore Meitei language and resist Indian domination. As a result, most north-easterners do not have typically Indian-accented English. Like most junior call centre workers, the bulk of north-east migrants are unmarried and in their 20s. Most do not have children or have left their children with relatives back home. This makes them able to work shifts timed to serve Australian, European and North American business hours. Thus, north-east migrants have become desirable as a 'flexible' and well-qualified workforce for the burgeoning call centre industry.

As familiarity with the industry has grown, north-easterners have begun migrating to Delhi solely to work in call centres. Call centres recruit in the north-east neighbourhoods in Delhi. One advertisement I spotted in Munirka, a neighbourhood popular with north-east migrants, asked for "150 telli-callers" for work calling "UK and US", and requests applicants from "North-East People" (*sic*). Call centre recruitment agencies travel to the north-east recruiting high school and college graduates. Mina, a

postgraduate student from Sikkim, remembered the visit of recruiting agencies to her high school in the mid 2000s. The recruiters told the students they could work for foreign companies and earn a good salary. They showed pictures of the call centre in new office buildings in Noida. She added that it looked so different from home where offices were in run-down old government buildings, and the idea of working for a foreign company opened the possibility of eventually going abroad.

According to respondents, finding work in call centres is relatively easy for north-east migrants. I met respondents who had taken full-time work in call centres after dropping out of university. Others were trying to get a job after university to tide them over until they could break into their preferred field. Others had gone back home and found it difficult to adjust, then returned to Delhi with no real plan and eventually took up call centre work. Others stayed working in call centres to avoid having to go home, especially to areas of conflict. Stephen, a 25-year-old from Nagaland, left home at 18 to study hospitality in Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab and Haryana. He got a job in an Indian café chain and was placed in different cities working as a *barista*. After a few years he was tired of moving around so he decided to come to Delhi so that he could earn a living but also live with other Nagas. Through friends, he got a job in a call centre. Stephen worked his way up quickly and switched companies a few times until he got a job in the finance department. He put his rise down to working hard and not cheating his employers—attributes that he felt explained the success of north-east migrants in call centres.

Despite his success in Delhi, Stephen did not want to work in call centres much longer and was eager to go back to Nagaland. However, he thinks this will be difficult. It

was not conflict that kept him away, but the sense that there were few ways to earn a living in Nagaland. Stephen admitted he had no connections back home. He did not come from a family with any 'big men' or MLAs (members of the legislative assembly). He pointed out that, even if he could find a job, he would not earn enough and he would have to pay money to the different armed groups and extortionists. Unless he was prepared to be corrupt, he would not be able to survive in the Nagaland economy; this is a sentiment that other respondents expressed about other states in the north-east. For him, work in Delhi did not have these same complexities. When you found a job, you worked hard and you were paid. Of course, north-east migrants do get exploited in the workplace; they get summarily dismissed, they have pay withheld, they are refused leave, etc. Yet compared with some of the challenges of making a living at home these can be minor concerns.

Challenges of Delhi

Economic inclusion in the spaces created by neo-liberalism draws migrants from all over the frontier to Delhi. However, outside the enclosed spaces of malls and call centres, north-east migrants face a number of challenges in their everyday lives in the city: racism; discrimination; and harassment. These challenges can mirror those faced by other migrants to Delhi, although respondents iterate that their negative experiences of the city are particular, owing to their position on the edge of India's geographical and cultural imaginary, and their racial differentiation from the Indian mainstream.

Racism

For north-east migrants, racism characterises their experience of Delhi. North-east migrants, particularly those with Mon-Khmer, Tai or

Tibeto-Burman roots, are judged based on ascriptive notions derived from their physical features. North-east migrants *look* different from the other peoples inhabiting Delhi, making it “difficult for them to escape from their ethnic identity if they wish to” (Eriksen, 2002, p. 6). India contains many communities earmarked as ‘others’ based on religion, caste and even ethnicity, yet the nationality of these communities is not under continued suspicion. Many of them can ‘blend in’ to the heartland in ways that north-east migrants cannot. This is not to argue that these ‘others’ do not face discrimination and violence, but instead to contend that the experiences of north-east migrants are distinct and reveal certain elements of contemporary Indian society otherwise obscured.

For most respondents, racism in Delhi is reflected in the epithet ‘chinky’. Respondents found this term integral in their everyday engagement with the city’s inhabitants. Respondents reported hearing the term called out in public places, in negotiations in shops and for transport, and used by colleagues or classmates. Most respondents found the term to be deeply racist and hostile. Chen, a student from Arunachal Pradesh, said that virtually every group in India went by at least one colloquial name, but they did not face the same treatment as north-easters. He gave the example of Bengali speakers. He pointed out that there are many stereotypes about Bengalis, but no one runs across the street to call names in their faces as they do to north-easters.

Epithets matter because they reflect deeply embedded stereotypes about north-east women and men. Stereotypes are not always negative and have enabled the growth of the labour niche for north-easters, yet north-east women and men have very little control over the ways they are perceived, whether the impacts of these perceptions are positive or negative. North-easters are

cast as backward and exotic; this is particularly true for tribal communities. Colonial-era classifications have been reproduced in the systems of governing the north-east region in contemporary India (Barbora, 2008; van Schendel, 2002; Zou and Kumar, 2011) and in popular representations of tribals in museums, tourism campaigns, guidebooks, schoolbooks and national parades (Kikon, 2009; Patil, 2011). In almost all of these cases, tribals are represented using the three ‘un’ myths discussed by Echtner and Prasad (2003): ‘unchanged’, ‘unrestrained’ and ‘uncivilised’. Secondly, they are cast as anti-national. Reporting on violence and ‘terrorism’ in the north-east is one of the few times that the region and its people are mentioned in the mainstream media (Hasan, 2004). This can create resentment of north-east migrants, especially those working, who are seen as taking jobs but not wanting to be part of India. Thirdly, they are cast as immoral. This affects north-east women and men in different ways. North-east women are cast as loose in morals and sexually promiscuous. North-east women work in highly visible occupations where their sexuality is emphasised; they live in shared houses; most are not yet married; they move about the city for work without male chaperons, almost always on public transport; those who work have some financial independence (subjecting them to speculation that they achieved this independence through ‘immoral’ means). North-eastern men are also subject to some of the loose and immoral assumptions, but are also cast as heavy drinkers, unpredictable and prone to violence.

Discrimination

Discrimination is felt most strongly in the housing market. Exploitation in the housing market happens to other migrants new to

the city. However, there is the perception among north-easterners that they experience it at far greater levels and for reasons that are particular to their race. Most north-east migrants prefer to live with people from back home in areas like Shanti Niketan, Safdarjang Enclave, Green Park, South Extension I and other areas like Murnika near Jawaharlal Nehru University and the suburbs around G. T. B. Nagar Metro station close to Delhi University campus. Housing for north-east migrants is expensive. Respondents surveyed in January and February 2011 were paying between 5500 rupees (US\$122) for a single room and 8500 rupees (US\$190) for what is called a 1 + 1 room (usually one big bedroom and a smaller room with a kitchenette) per month. For migrants working in malls and call centres, this is between 40 and 80 per cent of their monthly income. For those not working, the cost of housing can be a major drain on their families back home.

There is an overwhelming feeling among respondents that north-easterners pay far more for housing than other groups. Many north-east migrants arrive in Delhi with limited Hindi language skills and are in a poor bargaining position with housing agents and landlords. Respondents felt that landlords pretended to misunderstand them to then take advantage of confusion and charge a higher rent. One respondent complained of his landlord installing a separate electricity meter in his room and then demanding 2000 rupees (US\$45) for electricity at the end of the month without ever presenting a bill. There are stories of landlords raising the rent with no warning, keeping advances but renting rooms to others, keeping their own keys to the flat and in two cases giving copies of these keys to unknown persons, renting to other tenants when migrants returned to the north-east for short visits and refusing to evict the new tenants unless the first renter agreed to pay more, refusing to fix broken

taps, pipes, lights, heaters, holes and vermin problems.

The stereotype of the immoral north-easterner is used by housing agents and landlords to justify higher rents. Often this is stated to tenants explicitly and several respondents were told that, because they want to live in mixed-sex flats, they must pay more. It is common for north-easterners to share housing and to stay with friends if they do not have anywhere else to stay. Many households have male and female tenants, sometimes in relationships with each other, but usually they are friends or members of the same tribe or clan back home. This fuels anxiety from some owners about the morality of north-east tenants. Landlords also use food as leverage. Bamboo shoots, the staple of cuisine in the hill areas, *akhuni* a fermented soy paste common in Naga cooking and fermented fish, are targeted for their unfamiliar odours. Some respondents reported that this is used to drive up rental prices; landlords argue that, as north-easterners will be cooking smelly food, landlords need to be compensated to offset complaints by other tenants.

Further, migrants feel that they have limited ways to redress this. If their landlord cheats them, they rarely take the issue to the authorities because they assume they will be on the losing end of the dispute. However, migrants have found ways to cope. North-easterners who do not speak Hindi will ask friends who do to deal with landlords. North-east males will deal with landlords on behalf of female tenants. There is also a growing trend of passing housing onto friends or tribe and clan members when leaving the city. As clusters of north-east migrants have developed in parts of Delhi, landlords too have seen the value of being known as sympathetic to north-east lifestyles. In Humayanpur and Munirka, there are scores of small real estate agents operating out of small shop-fronts, Internet shops

and grocery stores. Many of them specialise in finding houses for north-easterners with landlords who tolerate their lifestyles, advertising their services in English in north-east neighbourhoods.

Harassment

North-east migrants experience harassment and violence in Delhi. Respondents were adamant that the day-to-day violence that characterises their time in Delhi is continually downplayed in the media, by the authorities and by non-north-easterners. Delhi has a reputation as a violent city and one of the difficulties in discussing violence experienced by north-easterners in Delhi is the counter-claim that Delhi is a violent city and no community is immune. Most respondents reject this argument. As one respondent from Nagaland put it

They will always go on about Delhi being unsafe. They think it is not different for us. But it is. We are walking targets.

North-easterners feel that they are targeted because of their race, they have virtually no recourse to justice and they are blamed for the violence they experience. In the pamphlet *Security tips for north east students/visitors in Delhi*, issued by the Delhi Police, north-east women are advised to act and dress more conservatively. The pamphlet reads

Revealing dress to be avoided. Avoid lonely road/bylane when dressed scantily. Dress according to sensitivity of the local populace (Delhi Police, 2005).

Respondents found this pamphlet and its sentiments amusing, but also instructive of the ways in which they are viewed. North-east women are held responsible for the sexual harassment they have to endure and

the perpetrators are often ignored (Puri, 2006).

As the bulk of my fieldwork took place in the first months of 2011, there was a recent incident that captured the sense of vulnerability and growing anger among north-east migrants. The incident was talked about all the time: whether discussions were about race, gender, Delhi, India, work, safety or housing. In November 2010, a 30-year-old call centre worker from Mizoram was abducted at gunpoint and gang raped in a car. The perpetrators waited for the woman to be dropped back to her home in a north-east neighbourhood after working a shift at a call centre, suggesting that she was carefully targeted (Chandra, 2010). The police failed to make any arrests. Six days later, almost 2000 people—the majority mobilised by north-east student unions and church groups—protested at Jantar Mantar, a well-known protest site in central Delhi. By early December, a number of these groups had secured a meeting with the Chief Minister of Delhi, Sheila Dixit, and they submitted a list of 15 demands to improve the safety of north-east migrants (NESCH, 2010). Arrests slowly followed. Respondents pointed to this as evidence that the police will never take violence against north-easterners seriously and that it takes the Chief Minister to push them into action. Respondents were able to cite dozens of cases of similar violence, many of which are catalogued by church organisations in Delhi and most of which appear in the vernacular media back in the north-east, often alongside editorials warning of the perils of migrating to the heartlands.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, the creation of exclusionary spaces through the neo-liberal transformation of cities like Delhi has received a

great deal of attention from scholars. The consensus view is that this transformation is further excluding large parts of the population, especially already-marginalised communities and recent migrants. In this view, marginal peoples share a common fate at the hands of this transformation and their rights to the city are trampled by the onslaught of neo-liberal capital and accommodating authorities. The case of north-east migrants is difficult to fit into the exclusionary city narrative. Many north-east migrants benefit from the neo-liberal transformation of Delhi, at least in terms of employment and economic inclusion in the city. In fact, these changes are connecting the frontier and heartland in relatively peaceful ways, something that decades of state development policies, scholarships and reservations for north-easterners, and counter-insurgency campaigns, have been unable to achieve. In a sense, the neo-liberal transformation of Delhi is changing perceptions of Indian citizenship among individuals and communities in the north-east. The strength of ethno-nationalism and separatism in the north-east has historically created hostility and ambivalence towards Indian citizenship. Yet migration to Delhi shows the inwards pull of citizenship, in contrast to the outwards pull of ethnic ties across international borders. As citizens, north-easterners can travel to the heartland cities like Delhi to work in occupations that did not exist to the same extent a decade ago. There are still limits to this, and time will tell whether migration to heartland cities produces anything more than an instrumental sense of citizenship for north-east migrants and those returning home.

Outside these spaces of economic inclusion, many north-east migrants continue to live as exceptional citizens. They experience racism, discrimination, harassment and violence. Respondents were far from convinced that their economic inclusion in the

city would significantly alter their place in Indian society. It is within the spaces of 'new India'—malls, restaurants, spas and call centres—that north-east migrants are included in the city, while their experiences outside these spaces reinforce their marginality. Importantly, this case is not an endorsement of neo-liberalism. Rather, it shows the unevenness of its effects. This unevenness is not simply experienced by different people in the same city, benefitting some and harming others, but this unevenness is experienced in different aspects of life by individuals and members of particular communities. As Mathews points out in his study of Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, which he refers to as "the most globalized building in the world", the effects of neo-liberalism are largely benign, and in some respects positive, for the traders, asylum seekers and illegal workers from South Asia, Africa and elsewhere who inhabit the building (Mathews, 2011, p. 213). Yet their experiences outside this building in other parts of Hong Kong can be far less positive and there are remnants of hardened attitudes towards foreigners. Indeed, in the case of Delhi, it could be argued that, despite neo-liberalism opening the city to more and more migrants from the frontier, embedded stereotypes towards ethnic and tribal communities from the north-east frontier still hold, unaffected by the neo-liberal transformation of the city and its labour markets. Yet there are changes evident here as well in the re-placing of tribal and ethnic minority subjectivity through their presence in highly conspicuous occupations associated with fashion, style and consumption. It is unclear whether this is necessarily advantageous to north-east migrants, as it tends to emphasise difference, heightened sexuality and a separate moral order. However, it is difficult to determine what is 'new racism' drawn from the occupations that north-east migrants

undertake in the city, and what is 'old racism' drawn from embedded understandings of the frontier and its people.

The case of north-east migrants in Delhi complicates the exclusionary narrative and forces sharper focus on the intricate dynamics of urban change. It also shows the ways in which the city and the periphery are connected through the neo-liberal transformation of urban India, as well as the limits of this connectivity. North-east migrants are not the only beneficiaries of these changes, yet their prominence in the consumer and service industries, and the impact this has had on the flows and profile of migrants from the frontier to urban India, make them the ideal case for analysing these changes. In the case of north-east migrants in Delhi, their economic inclusion in the city appears to have had little effect in spaces farther afield. This may not be the case in years to come, or indeed in other locations, but the possibilities of inclusion in transforming cities for otherwise marginal groups requires deeper investigation, along with more detailed research into those returning to the frontier after time spent in neo-liberal Delhi.

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