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Leaving the Northeast Borderland: Place-making and the Inward Pull of Citizenship in India

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Abstract

This article analyses the connections between borderlands and heartlands through migrants leaving Northeast India and migrating to Delhi. While real and potential cross border flows capture the imagination of borderlands scholars, the inward pull of citizenship from borderlands to heartlands is equally important in shaping the present and future environment of borderlands and frontiers. This article is concerned with three interlinked dynamics evident in the migration from the borderland to the heartland. First, as distinctive ethnic minorities from the borderlands, Northeast migrants experience racism, violence and discrimination in Indian cities suggesting that encounters between frontiers and heartlands are rarely seamless. Second, while these negative experiences are crucial in shaping the lives of Northeast migrants in Indian cities, they are not just “victims of the city” and create a sense of place through neighbourhoods, food, and faith. Third, migration demonstrates the shifting effect of national citizenship on Northeast communities.

Introduction

The case of migration from Northeast India, one of Asia’s quintessential borderlands, to the capital city Delhi, demonstrates the inward pull of national citizenship for borderland communities whose historical relationship with India is characterised by ambiguity and hostility. Much of the borderlands literature has focussed on cross-border connectivity, yet changing urban dynamics in emerging economies like India are drawing borderland dwellers away from so-called “shatter zones”¹ towards metropolises within national boundaries. What explains this inward migration? Moreover, how do those moving from borderlands experience this migration? Migration from the Northeast borderland to Indian cities has increased rapidly in the last decade. Limited livelihood prospects back home, changing social aspirations, and sporadic armed conflicts push migrants out of the borderland. At the same time, expanding employment opportunities in the retail and services sector in Indian cities, along with labour recruitment in the borderlands, and growing networks of migrants based on clan, kin, and ethnic ties pull migrants to heartland cities. This article is concerned with three interlinked dynamics evident in the migration from the borderland to the heartland. First, as distinctive ethnic minorities from the borderlands, Northeast migrants experience racism, violence

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¹ James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

and discrimination in Indian cities suggesting that encounters between borderlands and heartlands are rarely seamless, particularly during phases of increased movement. Second, while these negative experiences are crucial in shaping the lives of Northeast migrants in Indian cities, they are not just “victims of the city” and create a sense of place through neighbourhoods, food, and faith. Third, citizenship figures in the multiple and complex identities of Northeast people, though rarely in a straightforward fashion. On the one hand, identity is predicated in part on rejecting India, demonstrated through ethno-nationalism, insurgency, and extreme notions of territoriality. On the other hand, Indian citizenship provides material benefits including the right to live and work in Delhi and other heartland cities. Thus while real and potential cross border flows capture the imagination of borderlands scholars, the inward pull of citizenship from borderlands to heartlands is equally important in shaping the present and future environment of borderlands.

This article is the result of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Delhi in 2010 and 2011. It also builds upon ten years of ethnographic research in the Northeast itself. While the experience of migrants in Delhi cannot be wholly generalised to all Indian cities, Delhi provides the greatest diversity of migrants and is home to the largest community of Northeast migrants. In a city of approximately 15 million inhabitants, Northeast migrants number somewhere between 200,000 to 400,000 inhabitants.² While this may seem a numerically insignificant population, Northeast migrants are highly visible in the city owing to their employment in retail and hospitality, their creation of distinct places within the city, and their use of public space to protest and engage in public life. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted with migrants from all parts of the Northeast, but was more concentrated among migrants from the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. Primary data was collected through interviews and conversations, and also through participant observation in migrant communities over many months.

This article has five sections. The first section discusses recent literature on borderlands and the need to examine migration within national boundaries, alongside the far more common emphasis on cross-border movement. The second section details the scope of migration from Northeast India to Indian cities in recent decades. The third section focuses on negative experiences of the city among migrants, including racism, discrimination, and violence. The fourth section analyses the ways migrants respond by creating a sense of place in the city. The final section explores the centrality of citizenship in encounters between the borderlands and heartlands in a globalising era.

Making Inward Migration Visible

The focus of this article is Northeast India, a region with a population of just over 40 million people. The Northeast is a quintessential borderland, sharing over 90 per cent of its borders with other countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The Northeast is barely connected by land to the rest of India. Far from homogenous the region is home to a diverse population ethnically

² North East Support Centre and Helpline, *North East Migration and Challenges in National Capital Cities* (Delhi: NESCH, 2011), 10.

distinct from the rest of the country, even when accounting for India's ethnic and cultural diversity. There are eight federal states in the region: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, as well as a number of autonomous territories. The region is populated by three main categories of people: indigenous communities classified as "Scheduled Tribes" which make up the majority of the population in five out of eight of the federal states in the region, other ethnic groups not classified

as tribes but sharing ethnic lineage with groups in East and Southeast Asia (principally the Ahom of Assam and Meiteis of Manipur), and migrant communities from other parts of India and surrounding countries. Christianity is the dominant religion among tribals with smaller communities of Buddhists and animists, while communities in the valleys practice Hinduism and Islam.

Since Indian independence the Northeast has been characterised by armed struggles and under-development. These struggles have been based upon territorial control whether in response to forced integration into the Indian Union, uneven local political and economic autonomy, and uncontrolled migration into border areas. In response, the Indian government has created new states and territorial units normalising the notion of "ethnically exclusive homelands."³ As a result conflicts exist between different ethnic and tribal groups (and the territorial units representing them), between particular ethnic groups and the Indian state, and between communities indigenous to the region and migrants.⁴ As such ethnic and tribal identities are paramount in the region and ethnic identity politics are at the heart of social, political and economic life in the region.⁵ This makes a pan-regional identity ethereal, though migration does create a sense of shared fate for migrants in Indian cities, particularly in Delhi where the sense of hostility experienced by Northeasterners is heightened. Many communities, such as Bhutias, Garos, Mizos, and Nagas are present on both sides of the international border enclosing the region. Furthermore, for many communities in the region their historical ties



Figure 1: The Northeast States and their Location on India's Eastern Frontier

³ Sanjib Baruah, "Citizens and Denizens: Ethnicity, Homelands, and the Crisis of Displacement in Northeast India," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16 (2003): 44-66.

⁴ Subhir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: A Crisis of India's North East* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

⁵ Duncan McDue-Ra, "Anti-Development or Identity Crisis? Misreading Civil Society in Meghalaya, India," *Asian Ethnicity* 8 (2007): 43-59; Duncan McDue-Ra, "Between National Security and Ethno-nationalism: The Regional Politics of Development in Northeast India," *Journal of South Asian Development* 3 (2008): 185-210.

have been east and north to Southeast Asia and China, rather than west to India. Migration from the borderlands is evidence of changes to these flows and is also instrumental in redirecting flows.

Research into borderlands has grown substantially in the last decade and a half. The pioneering work of Willem van Schendel⁶ is paramount in the Asian context. His provocative challenge to locate borders in the centre of our analysis and rethink space beyond the nation-state has resonated with scholars in history, politics, and anthropology. Especially compelling is his concept of *Zomia*, his name for the upland massif stretching throughout mainland Southeast Asia to the Yunnan province in China, the hill areas of Northeast India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, and the Himalayas.⁷ For Van Schendel, a focus on *Zomia* unsettles academic study partitioned into regional specialisations and area studies excluding vast areas of *Zomia* and/or analysing them as peripheries of existing nation-states. This has major implications for the Northeast borderland. Through a borderlands lens, the Northeast is no longer India's periphery but a space that is part of a shared cultural zone extending east, north, and south across relatively recent international boundaries.

James Scott has historicised *Zomia* in his seminal work, *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott concentrates on what he terms the “greatest social cleavage” in Southeast Asian history: the hill-valley divide.⁸ As valley “civilizations” spread through the expansion of wet- rice cultivation and “enclosed” non-state space, various peoples wishing to escape taxes, conscription, warfare, slavery, forced labour, and disease headed for the hills. These “shatter zones,”⁹ out of range of state authority, were characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity and by relative geographic inaccessibility. Hill peoples inhabiting the peripheries of state space have been much maligned by histories that privilege “civilizations.” In these histories, hill peoples are seen as barbaric, primitive, and threatening. Scott contests this view by arguing that the attributes labelled barbaric are not signs of pre-civilisational peoples but adaptations to life in shatter zones and the continuing desire of hill peoples to evade assimilation and incorporation into the state. Rather than viewing hill peoples as being outside history, Scott instead gives them an anarchist history. Scott sees *Zomia* as the key to understanding the dialectal and symbiotic relationship between hills and valleys, emphasising their connection and their mutual antagonism.

Interest in Asian borderlands has proliferated in the wake of these influential studies. Research networks, conferences, journals, and scores of publications draw attention to borderlands from multiple academic disciplines. The upsurge in borderland studies has given new life to studies of Northeast India. Scholars of the region are now able to make legitimate claims that the borderland warrants extensive attention in its own right. Conceptualising the region as a borderland renders alternative economies, geographies, histories, identities, nationalisms, and transnational relationships visible. The region is no longer simply viewed as India's periphery but a region where communities

⁶ Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D* 20 (2002): 647-668. Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem, 2005).

⁷ Van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing,” 653.

⁸ Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 2.

⁹ Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 24.

are connected across international boundaries. While state-making has ruptured these connections, communities have found new ways to circumvent borders and challenge attempts by different sovereign governments to enclose territory. The borderlands paradigm demonstrates the ways in which communities in borderlands look “outwards” across borders, thereby challenging statist notions of citizenship and belonging. In many ways, this suggests a natural outward orientation by communities whose lives are intimately linked across borders. Borderlands studies have enabled this outward orientation to take centre stage. However, enthusiasm for analysing outward orientation across borders has made inward orientation by borderland dwellers less apparent and the study of inward orientation less inventive. Migration from the borderlands to Delhi is important because it reveals the inward pull of the heartland, even for people who view this heartland with ambiguity, distrust, and hostility. This will be discussed below. The following section discusses the scope of migration from the borderland to Delhi.

Northeast Migrants in Delhi

Migration from the Northeast to Delhi has increased dramatically in the last decade, yet scholarly attention to migration out of the Northeast is scarce. Scholars have long focussed on migration *into* the region from other parts of India and neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh, seen as fuelling ethno-nationalist politics and insurgency.¹⁰ Migration from the Northeast to Delhi has taken place since Indian independence. Those travelling to Delhi were mostly travelling to be trained in 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 (IAS) exams, Delhi attracted the wealthy and/or educated from the Northeast. This group of migrants continues to come to Delhi but the dramatic growth of migrants from other backgrounds coming for work in retail, hospitality, and call centres that is most remarkable and most visible.

As migration to Delhi does not cross international borders and as most Northeast migrants do not own property or capital in Delhi, their population is not accurately recorded. A survey released by the Delhi-based NGO, North East Support Centre and Helpline, in early 2011, puts the number of migrants outside the Northeast at 414,850.¹¹ The same report cites a twelve-fold increase in migration out of the Northeast from 2005 to 2011. Of migrants leaving the Northeast, 48 per cent migrate to Delhi, making for a population of around 200,000. Survey figures are likely to be underestimates, as movement back and forth between the Northeast and Delhi is constant and periods of stay vary dramatically from a few months to several years, making a representative sample difficult to capture.

Primary data suggest most Northeast migrants come to Delhi after secondary school without their parents, though some migrate with siblings. Both men and women migrate to Delhi in more or less equal proportions. Most migrants in Delhi are in their 20s. Among older respondents in their 30s

¹⁰ Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*; Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000).

¹¹ North East Support Centre and Helpline, *North East Migration*, 10.

and 40s, some had come to Delhi in their 20s and stayed, others had come to Delhi from another city such as Bangalore or Kolkata or from abroad for work, while others had come directly from the Northeast to work in the public and private sectors. Among all migrants, some have partners and children with them, while others come alone and leave their families back home. Some young couples give birth to their children in Delhi. There are more families coming to Delhi together, though this appears small when compared to the migrants who come alone or with siblings. In sum, migrants include those who have come to Delhi to work, those who have come to work and study, those who have come only to study, and those that began doing one but have now started doing the other. There is also a smaller group doing neither.

In interviews and conversations, migrants gave a number of reasons for leaving the Northeast. Three main reasons are discussed here. The first is refuge from conflict. By this I do not wish to suggest that the Northeast is constantly violent, rather the prospect of violence is constant. The number of ceasefires currently in place in the Northeast means that, at least theoretically, conflict is more subdued now than in the past. Sudden outbreaks of violence have usually led to internal displacement and temporary migration within the Northeast itself. Migration to Delhi, which is over 2,000 kilometres away from parts of the Northeast, requires planning, resources, and a commitment of at least a few months and usually a few years. Leaving because of conflict requires consideration of the ways violence is normalized into everyday life in the region. Violence, to draw on Gyan Pandey, has become “routine” and unspectacular.¹² The presence of large numbers of Indian military and paramilitary throughout the region, all protected from persecution under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in place since 1958, imputes a deep sense of insecurity in everyday life.¹³ In addition the presence of large numbers of militant groups, as many as 120,¹⁴ involved in various activities from fighting for rights and autonomy to blackmail and extortion, exacerbate this situation. Torture, murder, beatings, rape, and harassment are frequent in this environment, and the prospects of justice are fleeting as members of the Indian military and paramilitary are protected by the extraordinary legislation of the AFSPA and militants from rival ethnic or tribal groups are usually protected by their own community or operate underground. Those who can leave this environment do. Respondents often mentioned that it was not specific outbreaks of violent conflict that spurred their choice to migrate but the culture of violence in the region.¹⁵ However, what has changed in recent years is that the population who *can* leave has broadened and the distance they are prepared to go has increased. This leads to the second theme below.

Second, people leave the region to pursue livelihoods. Unemployment in the Northeast is

¹² Gyan Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

¹³ Dolly Kikon, “The Predicament of Justice: Fifty Years of Armed Forces Special Powers Act in India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 17 (2009): 271-28; Duncan McDuiie-Ra, “50-year Disturbance: The Armed Forces Special Powers Act and Exceptionalism in a South Asian Periphery,” *Contemporary South Asia* 17 (2009): 255-270.

¹⁴ Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁵ Swarna Rajagopalan, *Peace Accords in Northeast India: Journey over Milestones* (Washington: East-West Center, 2008).

high and civil service jobs are difficult to access for those without connections. Six decades of conflict has created a corrupt patronage system throughout the region. In a sensitive border region the Indian government requires loyalty from local governments in the region and insurgency and instability is used as leverage to demand more funds from Delhi. These funds are in turn distributed to local contractors with connections to the local elite. In some of the most corrupt and dysfunctional states, such as Manipur, civil service jobs are even bought and sold by those with connections. Those buying them do not always end up working in them, but pay someone else to do the job at a lower portion of the salary while they take up other work. Private sector jobs are few. Conflict and central government anxiety has reduced private sector investment and investment that does exist is in extractive industries with minimal local employment.¹⁶ With a well educated and highly literate population in the tribal majority states, the lack of livelihood options contributes to an environment of frustration, militancy, narcotic drug use, and migration out of the region to find jobs elsewhere.¹⁷

This ties into the third theme. Migration out of the Northeast reflects changing aspirations and changing attitudes towards India. Middle class desires, analysed with fervour in the rest of India, are also present in the borderland. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, in place since 1947, has provided reserved places for tribals in the bureaucracy and in educational institutions increasing the size of the middle class. It also gives traditional institutions power over land. As the value of land has increased through the shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture this has empowered a class of rural land-brokers and absentee landlords.¹⁸ Better connectivity to other parts of India and to neighbouring countries has increased the availability of consumer goods, especially those coming across international borders from China. The rapid growth of cities and towns in the region, linked in part to changes to land and the displacement from conflict has urbanised lifestyles for many but also increased the cost of housing. Careerism, something limited among previous generations, is far more common among youth in the borderlands.

How does all of this relate to migration? For parents having their children working or studying in Delhi or another city is important for their status and standing in the community. For migrants, the desire to live a middle-class lifestyle, to consume goods, to own property (usually always back home), and to secure employment in the civil service or private sector, migration is necessary to begin earning money and/or to take up tertiary education. Delhi is the preferred destination as it is home to the best universities in India, most with reserved places for people from the Northeast, and is where the tools of the Indian bureaucracy can be learned.

The availability of work means that migrants from the Northeast can support themselves while they study, or support family members to study. With limited employment prospects, education

¹⁶ Monirul Hussain, *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North East India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008); McDue-Ra, “Between National Security and Ethno-nationalism.”

¹⁷ Sanjib Baruah, “Gulliver’s Troubles: State and Militants in North-East India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (2002): 4178-4182; Michelle Kermode et al. “Killing Time with Enjoyment: A Qualitative Study of Initiation into Injecting Drug Use in North-East India,” *Substance Use and Misuse* 44 (2009): 1070-1089.

¹⁸ Sanjoy Barbora, “Ethnic Politics and Land Use: Genesis of Conflicts in India’s North-East,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (2002): 1285-1292.

is sought after to gain an edge in labour markets back in the Northeast, especially in the public sector, and to meet changing aspirations and consumer desires. Furthermore, as Northeast migrants have begun to create a niche in certain labour markets in cities, labour recruiters are travelling to the Northeast to offer jobs in call centres, restaurants, hotels, and spas making compelling cases to leave the region and normalising migration as a rite of passage for the region's youth.

The neoliberal transformation of Delhi, often critiqued for excluding the working poor and minority communities, has created opportunities for Northeast migrants. Northeast migrants covet the employment opportunities in the spaces of neoliberal capital, and employers in these spaces desire Northeast labour – especially in restaurants, shopping malls and call centres. As Christine Brosius' study of consumerism in Delhi has shown, malls are designed to satisfy the desire of the upper and aspiring middle classes to "live abroad in India."¹⁹ To truly experience this kind of status driven consumption consumer spaces serving these classes are designed to project a global aesthetic; an aesthetic reproduced by migrant labour from the borderland. Northeast migrants find work in clothing stores, sports stores, spas and cosmetic stores. In restaurants, Northeast men and women worked as wait staff and maître d', as well as in kitchens. The highly orientalised labour force constructs a space that is in Delhi but not of Delhi; perfect for "world-class" aspirations of the middle classes.

Call centres flourish in Delhi, especially in the satellite cities of Gurgaon and Noida.²⁰ Mirchandani's research on Delhi call centres serving North American voice-to-voice clients shows that workers in call centres are trained to "neutralise" their accents and conduct "locational masking."²¹ Northeast migrants are well equipped to play the neutral role. Many migrants from the borderland attend English medium schooling and literacy rates in hill areas of the Northeast are high. English is also the *lingua franca* between different ethnic groups. Many Northeast migrants do not have typically Indian accented English. In addition, many Northeast migrants are unmarried without children making them able to work shifts timed to serve Australian, European, and North American business hours. As such they have become desirable as a "flexible" and well-qualified workforce for the call centre industry.

Racism and Violence

Northeast migrants face a number of challenges in their everyday lives in the city. These challenges can mirror those faced by other migrants to Delhi, though respondents claim that they feel their negative experiences of the city are particular, owing to their position on the edge of India's geographic and cultural imaginary and their racial differentiation from the broad (yet diverse) Indian mainstream. For Northeast migrants, racism characterises their experience of Delhi. Northeast

¹⁹ Christine Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 65.

²⁰ Veronique Dupont, "The Dream of Delhi as a Global City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (2011), 541.

²¹ Kiran Mirchandani, "Practices of Global Capital: Gaps, Cracks and Ironies in Transnational Call Centres in India," *Global Networks* 4 (2004): 355-373.

migrants, particularly those with Mon-Khmer, Tai, or Tibeto-Burman roots, are judged based on ascriptive notions derived from their physical features. Northeast migrants *look* different to the other peoples inhabiting Delhi, making it “difficult for them to escape from their ethnic identity if they wish to.”²² India contains many communities earmarked as “others” based on religion, caste, and even ethnicity, yet the nationality and origin of these communities are not questioned at every turn. Many of them can “blend in” to the heartland in ways that Northeast migrants cannot.

For most respondents racism in Delhi is reflected in the epithet “chinky.” Respondents cited this term as 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. Epithets reflect deeply embedded stereotypes about women and men from the borderland. Stereotypes are not always negative and have enabled the growth of the labour niche for Northeasterners, yet Northeast women and men have very little control over the ways they are perceived, whether the impacts of these perceptions are positive or negative.

Northeasterners 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 Northeast region in contemporary India and in popular representations of tribals in museums, tourism campaigns, guidebooks, schoolbooks, and national parades.²³ Second they are cast as anti-national. Reporting on violence and “terrorism” in the Northeast is one of the only times that the region and its people are mentioned in the mainstream media.²⁴ This can create resentment of Northeast migrants, especially those working, seen as taking jobs but not wanting to be part of India. Third they are cast as immoral. This affects Northeast women and men in different ways. Northeast women are cast as loose in morals and sexually promiscuous. Northeast 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, and those who work have some financial independence (subjecting them to speculation that they achieved this independence through “immoral” means). Men are also subject to some of the loose and immoral assumptions but are also cast as heavy drinkers, unpredictable, and potentially violent.

These stereotypes feed discrimination. Discrimination is felt most strongly in the housing market. Housing for Northeast migrants is expensive. Respondents surveyed in January and February 2011 were paying between 5,500 rupees (\$122) for a single room and 8,500 rupees (\$190) for what is called a 1 plus 1 room (usually one big bedroom and a smaller room with a kitchenette) per month.

²² Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 6.

²³ Sanjay Barbora, “Autonomous Districts and/or Ethnic Homelands: An Ethnographic Account of the Genesis of Political Violence in Assam (North-East India) Against the Normative Frame of the Indian Constitution,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 15 (2008): 313-334; Vrushali Patil, “Narrating Political History about Contested Space: Tourism Websites of India’s Northeast,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 38 (2011): 989-1008; Virginius Xaxa, “Tribes as Indigenous People of India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (1999): 3589-95.

²⁴ Daisy Hasan, “Out of the Box: Televisual Representations of North-East India,” *Sarai Reader: Crisis/Media* (2004): 126-129.

For migrants working in malls and call centres this is between 40-80 per cent of their monthly income. For those not working the cost of housing can be a major drain on their families back home. This has two main impacts. First, migrants share living space as much as possible. Second, more and more migrants have to work to stay in Delhi, either instead of studying or during study.

Many Northeast migrants arrive in Delhi with limited Hindi language skills and are in a poor bargaining position with housing agents and landlords. Respondents felt landlords pretended to misunderstand them to then take advantage of confusion and charge them higher rent. There were 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 Northeast 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 Northeasterner is used by landlords and housing agents 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 Northeasterners 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 about the morality of Northeast tenants. Landlords also use food as leverage. Bamboo shoots, a staple food in the hill areas, *akhuni* a fermented soy paste common in Northeast 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 Northeasterners cook smelly food they need to be compensated to offset complaints by other tenants.

Exploitation in the housing market happens to other migrants new to the city. However there is the perception among Northeasterners that they experience it at far greater levels and for reasons that are particular to their race. Further, they feel they have limited ways to redress this. If their landlord cheats them they rarely take the issue to the authorities, as they assume they will be on the losing end of the dispute. However, migrants have found ways to cope. Northeasterners who do not speak Hindi will ask friends who do to deal with landlords. Northeast 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 Northeast migrants have developed in parts of Delhi, landlords too have seen the value of being known as sympathetic to Northeast lifestyles.

Linked to racism and discrimination is violence. 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-Northeasterners. Delhi has a reputation as a violent city. One of the difficulties in discussing violence experienced by Northeasterners in Delhi is the counter claim that Delhi is a violent city and no community is immune. Most respondents reject this argument and feel they are deliberately targeted. Northeasterners feel they are targeted because of their race, they have virtually no recourse to justice, and they are blamed for the violence they experience. Respondents related scores of other stories of incidents they experienced or witnessed. In addition, there were

certain violent incidents that happened to other Northeasterners in Delhi that have become part of migrant folklore. These incidents were raised again and again by different respondents and presented as evidence of racism and discrimination. These include the rape and murder of a Manipuri woman in her rented room in south Delhi in January 2007. This case was also remembered because in the aftermath, blame for the incident was directed at the murdered woman for allegedly inviting the attack. In a case from October 2007, two women from Nagaland were subject to sexual advances by their boss. When the women resisted, they were suspended from work without pay. In January 2008, a gang of more than 20 men attacked and sexually assaulted two sisters from Manipur in the internet café the two sisters ran. In October 2008, a female Naga student was murdered by another student (a non-Northeasterner) when she resisted his sexual advances. In mid-2010, a Manipur woman was sexually assaulted and beaten by her boss for watching television at work in an empty restaurant.²⁵

In the pamphlet *Security tips for North East students/visitors in Delhi* issued by the Delhi Police, Northeast 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.”²⁶ Respondents found this pamphlet and its sentiments instructive of the ways they are viewed. Northeast women are held responsible for the sexual harassment they have to endure and the perpetrators are often ignored.

Beyond Victims: Place-making in Delhi

Discrimination, harassment, and violence combined with difficult economic circumstances, particularly related to inflated housing costs, make life in Delhi very challenging. Nonetheless, it is important to go beyond the notion of Northeast migrants as solely “victims of the city” to focus on the ways they navigate, negotiate, and ultimately survive and even thrive in the city in ways that are mostly invisible to other communities. The concept of place-making, drawn from Henri Lefebvre’s dialectical approach to everyday life and the social production of space,²⁷ provides a loose framework for analysing the ways Northeastern migrants create places from the bottom-up. Place-making occurs when a material space is inhabited and allows patterns and rhythms of life to develop. It is here that the landscape of Delhi is being reshaped in small and subtle ways. Northeasterners have a presence in the city beyond simply serving the economy. They occupy a set of overt and concealed places where they live, pray, socialise, celebrate, and establish everyday patterns and rituals.²⁸

Northeasterners work in certain occupations, live in certain neighbourhoods, eat certain foods that most other communities do not eat, practice minority religions (for the most part), and experience security and safety in certain ways affecting mobility and everyday decision making.

²⁵ See North East Support Centre and Helpline for Documentation <http://nehelpline.net/?p=472>. Accessed August 21, 2011.

²⁶ Delhi Police, *Security Tips for North East Students/Visitors in Delhi* (Delhi: Delhi Police West District, 2005).

²⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

²⁸ John Friedmann, “Reflections on Place and Place-making in the Cities of China,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31 (2007): 257-279.

Northeast neighbourhoods in Delhi help to reconstruct small spaces of the borderland in the vast and hostile city. Arjun Appadurai posits that “neighbourhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighbourhoods.”²⁹ For Northeast migrants, this means creating places that are “not like other parts of Delhi.” Northeasterners live in north and south Delhi, and in smaller numbers in east and west Delhi. In the north, migrants live in the neighbourhoods around Delhi University and close to GTB Nagar Metro Station. In the south there are a range of locations. Green Park, Munirka, Safdarjung Enclave, and Safdarjung Development Area are close to Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Indian Institute of Technology. Duala Kuan, Moti Bagh (south), and Shanti Niketan are popular areas close to Delhi University’s south campus. Other areas in the south include Kotla Mubarak and South Extension I and II. Munirka has become the main hub for Northeast migrants, especially new arrivals.

The lines between public and private can become blurred in Northeast neighbourhoods. Flats are small and many are windowless, so the space between flats, landings and stairwells, and the streets and alleyways of the neighbourhoods become the spaces of encounter – especially in the very dense alleyways of Humayunpur and Munirka. While it may be argued that all neighbourhoods possess these characteristics to some degree, this blurring of space needs to be understood in the context of the enclosure of space in middle and upper class Delhi neighbourhoods where gates, security guards, and cars are the norm.³⁰ It is not just Northeasterners who reside in these neighbourhoods but friends from other parts of the city that drop by, socialise in the square, and wander between apartments. Though clichéd, the neighbourhoods effectively function as an extension of village and neighbourhood life back in the borderland. Northeast businesses are starting to open in these neighbourhoods: butchers, restaurants, DVD shops, clothes shops, hairdressers. This gives a sense of permanence or at the very least a longer-term view of Northeast migration to the city. Along with this comes a sense of safety. Alongside this sense of safety is a sense of belonging. Importantly, the sense of belonging is not to Delhi itself, but to the localities within Delhi, where a little piece of home is recreated. Home is not recreated through material space – which hardly resembles in the Northeast, even its most dense urban areas – but through the lived experience of Northeast neighbourhoods.

Food is also vital. Northeasterners cannot get by in Delhi without access to food from home. Because this food is so distinct this involves skilled navigation of the city’s markets. Northeast food is far closer to food found to the east, in Burma, and to the north, in China (Yunnan). Respondents would constantly mention the centrality of food to their life in the city: lack of certain food is what respondents missed most about home, being unable to get food is what they hated most about Delhi, sharing food is central to friendships, and *being* a Hmar, a Khasi, or a Nishi³¹ in Delhi means being able to eat the food of home. Thus, knowing where to locate food is fundamental to Northeast

²⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 183.

³⁰ Anne Waldrop, “Gating and Class Relations: The Case of a New Delhi ‘Colony,’” *City and Society* 16 (2004): 93-116.

³¹ Different ethnic groups from the borderland.

knowledge of Delhi. Veterans of the city build this knowledge over time and pass it on to newcomers. One of the enduring rites of passage for young migrants in the city is learning where they can find pork, beef, and bamboo shoots as well as the language and bargaining skills to locate food.

Northeast food is varied and it is important not to overlook the core differences, particularly between the cuisine of the valley areas and of the hill areas. However, it is equally important to reiterate that Northeast food is very different to food found in other parts of India – taking into account, of course, the dramatic diversity within India. Alongside pork, an essential part of most cuisine is bamboo shoots, as well as chilli, fermented fish, yam, garlic, and ginger. In several hill areas, people eat dog, much to the consternation of others in India and farther afield. Hunting is an important part of village life, and thus all manner of wild animals are included in the diet from time to time. Snails are also widely eaten.

Practicing religions common in the borderlands is also an important part of place-making in the city. All major religions are practiced in the Northeast along with indigenous faiths, some of which are practiced in tandem with major religions. In the hills, religion is not necessarily simple, but most communities in the hills have been at least partially converted to Christianity over the last century and a half.³² The notable exceptions are Arunachal Pradesh, where different tribal and ethnic communities follow different faiths including indigenous faiths – most notably *donyi-polo*,³³ and Mahayana Buddhism – and Sikkim, where Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity coexist and in some cases overlap. In the valleys, all major religions are practiced, though among the Ahoms and Meiteis, Vaishnavite Hinduism is more prominent. Christianity is making headway among the Meitei along with a revivalist movement of *Sanamahism* and the persistence of *lai* worship.³⁴

Delhi contains places where migrants from the borderlands practice faith and places where religion serves social and welfare functions. There are scores of these places around the city. Most prominent against the backdrop of Delhi are churches. The size and membership of churches varies incredibly. Large churches function in very similar ways to churches in the borderland. The services can be fairly conservative, established denominations have their own premises (sometimes engulfing large parts of city blocks), and services are held in Northeast languages and thus cater to a specific ethnic or tribal community. Ministers in these churches are usually sent from the Northeast, and the increase in migration makes Delhi an important extension of home congregations to be supported and watched over.

This is in contrast to the many small churches operating throughout the Northeast neighbourhoods of Delhi and close to the university campuses. Their services are held in existing

³² Torkel Brekke, “Baptism and the Bible in Bengal,” *History of Religions* 45 (2006): 213-233; Tezenlo Thong, “‘Thy Kingdom Come’: The Impact of Colonization and Proselytization on Religion among the Nagas,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45 (2010): 595-609.

³³ *Donyi-polo* is an indigenous faith practiced among several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. It revolves around the worship of the sun and moon.

³⁴ *Sanamahism* is the pre-Vaishnavite faith of the Meitei. It has very localised forms but essentially is the worship of Sanamahi, the creator. *Lai* are different deities that take male and female forms. Often their worship is accommodated within Vaishnavism. See Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei *lai* haraoba* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1997).

churches shared by other communities, in schools, in community halls, and in rented rooms. Many of these small churches represent denominations less established in the Northeast. Some of these churches started as breakaway churches from larger entities and in some cases from other small entities. Some of these new churches hold services in English, which gives them a pan-Northeast congregation and also attracts other Christians in Delhi – most notably African migrants, Nepali Christians, and Christians from Burma (mostly Chin, Kachin, and Karen refugees). The “new” churches are the antithesis of the established churches and are characterised by casual clothes, younger preachers, live rock music, and lots of social events.

Places of worship dot the Delhi landscape with small spaces that are (almost) wholly Northeastern. They enliven a sense of belonging and establish links to the borderlands. Alongside spirituality, these places of worship are also sites for networking and support. The role of religious communities among migrant and diaspora communities is well studied and understood. Religious communities help newcomers find work, housing, and contacts. As most Northeastern migrants come to Delhi without their parents, religious communities provide support for migrants when they are sick, when they have been subject to violence, when they have financial difficulties, and when there are problems back home. Respondents related incidents where churches helped raise money for surgical operations, emergency housing in the case of domestic violence, alcohol rehabilitation, post-traumatic stress counselling, and for funerals back home. As few migrants are members of labour unions and personal insurance is still a new concept in India, religious communities provide a pool of resources, albeit often stretched thin, that enable migrants to endure unexpected events in Delhi and back home.

Citizenship

Citizenship figures in the multiple and complex identities of migrants from the borderland, though rarely in a straightforward fashion. Often overlooked within the analysis of identities among Northeasterners is citizenship. By citizenship, I refer to a more fluid understanding presented by Aihwa Ong,³⁵ who argues that contemporary citizenship entails far more than rights and duties tied to a particular territory and is instead undergoing various “mutations” that include both territorialized and universalized rights and norms. On the one hand, identity is predicated in part on rejecting Indian citizenship, demonstrated through ethno-nationalism, insurgency, and embedded notions of territoriality. On the other hand, Indian citizenship provides material benefits that related ethnic groups across international borders in neighboring countries do not share. The Sixth Schedule, with its affirmative action policies for ethnic minorities in the border region receives the most attention in this regard, but citizenship also gives different Northeast communities access to the burgeoning cities of the heartland to legally live, work, and/or study.

The inward pull of citizenship is intensifying for borderland dwellers. Though Indian citizenship does not entail wanton allegiance to the centralized state. For many Northeasterners, citizenship is instrumental. It is something that they hold and utilize to pursue livelihoods and seek

³⁵ Aihwa Ong, “Mutations in Citizenship,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 23 (2006): 499-505.

refuge from difficult local circumstances. Given the push factors behind migration from the region, individuals seeking to migrate have a limited set of choices about where they can go to find work. As citizens, they can go to the heartland cities of India and live and work legally. As livelihood opportunities and employment niches for Northeast migrants have grown, citizenship is being reconsidered in the borderland. As citizens, there are also places in universities and colleges and jobs in the public sector – many reserved through the Sixth Schedule. Therefore, while Northeasterners do look outwards across international borders to kin, to co-ethnics, to former territories, and to markets and trade routes, the pull of citizenship means Northeasterners are also looking inwards and utilising their citizenship status to meet livelihood needs, changing aspirations, and find safety.

The possibility of Northeasterners feeling something beyond instrumental citizenship also needs to be considered. The place-making practices are, in some ways, a performance of a type of citizenship. Northeasterners have a right to the city conferred by their citizenship, though there are boundaries to what this notion of rights entails. Northeast migrants are not interested in formal political representation in Delhi nor are they interested in shaping the ways Delhi is developed and governed. But they do contest the instances where their rights as citizens are violated. Some Northeast migrants also take the opportunity of being in Delhi to protest violations of rights back home in the borderlands. Citizenship enables Northeast migrants to make rights claims related to violence, discrimination, and monetary appropriation (especially by landlords) against the national and city governments, the police, and in some cases other citizens. These claims are not always successful, but a growing sense that citizenship enables these claims to be made can clearly be seen among migrants.

It is also important to recognise that some Northeasterners engage in active citizenship. This is true in the Northeast itself, where pride in Indian citizenship is evident in celebrations of Indian nationalism, support for national political parties (as opposed to regional parties), gratitude for protection from “hostile” neighbours, and in members of ethnic minority and tribal communities enlisting for the armed forces and paramilitary. In Delhi, there are Northeasterners who engage in active citizenship, though migration to the heartland can actually erode feelings of national belonging. Migrants who waved flags on Indian national holidays, learned the geography of every Indian state, and supported Indian sporting teams find that in the heartlands, they are often considered foreigners, no one knows where their states are, and they are targeted for harassment and violence. Migration from the borderlands can be a confronting experience that destabilises their conceptions of citizenship and national belonging as much as creating stronger bonds to the nation-state.

This raises the question of whether borderland dwellers are becoming willing Indian subjects. The experiences of Northeast migrants suggest that migration does not threaten ethnic or tribal identity. In contrast, migration affirms difference. Difference is expressed through parochial, pan-Northeast, and cosmopolitan identities – all of which affirm differentiation from the Indian mainstream. Indeed, one element of identity that is shifting through migration is the sense of pan-Northeast solidarity. In some ways, this is a retrograde identity that was popular in the decades leading up to and immediately following Indian Independence, especially among elites, but one that has capitulated to narrower ethno-nationalist tendencies since the early 1980s. Away from the

borderland, narrow identities are less viable in the face of shared experiences of the heartland. Furthermore, the homogenization of Northeasterners as a single group by other communities in Delhi has enhanced the sense of a shared identity. While many respondents reject this homogenization they are also drawn towards the sense of solidarity it creates. Race singles out Northeast migrants but also provides common ground, and migrants depend on one another to contest their experiences of prejudice and injustice in the heartland. While pan-Northeast solidarity does not hold absolutely, for the most part it cuts across ethnic, religious, and territorial rivalries that have been so destructive back home in the borderland.

Importantly, it is not just citizenship itself that drives the inward pull from the borderland to the heartland cities. Citizenship makes movement possible, but it is the cities themselves that pull migrants. Globalisation brings greater connectivity between nation-states, and much of this connectivity depends upon the physical infrastructure that passes through borderlands. These changes are central to the analysis of borderlands in Asia in the contemporary era. Yet this is only half the story. Borderlands are also profoundly affected by changes taking place elsewhere – in this case, the transformation of heartland cities like Delhi. The transformation of the Indian economy is fuelling demand for labour from the borderlands in Indian cities. These changes do not alter the physical landscape of the borderland in the same ways that gas pipelines, hydropower dams, and border trading posts do, but the impact on the social landscape is substantial.

Conclusion

In borderlands throughout Asia and other parts of the world, the outwards orientation of borderland dwellers across frontiers is met by the inward pull of work, education, and safety. Borderlands in Asia are undergoing intense transformations, as regional integration hastens the development of connections between neighbouring countries. These connections pass through borderlands. Once dead-ends and buffer zones, borderlands are becoming corridors for goods, people, resources, and capital. For Asian borderlands in proximity to the rapidly rising economies of China, India, and Russia, these changes are taking place with even greater intensity. However, the creation of corridors is countered by increased state control in borderlands. “Opening” the borderlands means an increased military presence, and in the case of India this is coupled by measures to fence its international borders and channel movement through specific border posts where movement can be monitored, controlled, and taxed.³⁶ Connectivity also allows for renewed assaults on insurgent and separatist groups, though in some locations, connectivity follows peace accords.

The changes to borderlands are unsettling for communities living in these areas. The patterns of movement that borderland communities have always undertaken are becoming easier, but they are also becoming easier for others from outside the frontier, increasing access to natural resources, border markets, and trade routes. Bigger players seize the opportunities of connectivity as much as

³⁶ Duncan McDue-Ra, “Tribals, Migrants and Insurgents: Security and Insecurity along the India-Bangladesh border,” *Global Change, Peace and Security* 24 (2012): 165-182.

local communities. As these changes take hold in different borderlands, attention needs to be paid to how communities respond – including through migration. Further research into the inward pull of citizenship in other borderlands will enable substantive comparisons to be made. A key task is identifying the conditions under which borderland dwellers look towards heartlands, and in many cases migrate away from borderlands. Furthermore, a sense of which groups and individuals continue to look outwards across borders, which look inwards to heartlands, and which look both ways will deepen our understanding of the relationships between borderlands and heartlands in a globalising era.

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