

A Cosmopolitan Race: Northeast Migrants in Delhi-NCR

By

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Cosmopolitanism in the Neoliberal Period

In a newspaper article, Mayank Austen Soofi, a popular photojournalist based in Delhi, describes the presence of a small Manipuri business in an urban village in South Delhi as the existence of a “barely acknowledged cosmopolitanism.”¹ In popular tabloids, the localities in Delhi such as Humayunpur and Munirka, where migrants from the Northeast live together, have been represented as cosmopolitan *moballas*, meaning neighbourhoods.² Duncan McDuie-Ra, who has made important contributions in the study of Northeastern migrants in Delhi, furthermore, observes a “pan-tribal” cosmopolitanism among the migrants.³ He argues that their enactment of “tribal” cosmopolitanism is a way of contesting archaic racial stereotypes by distinguishing oneself from host population or the “Indian mainstream.” Although McDuie-Ra’s assessment is rich in analysis, yet it effects a reductionist objectification of migrant identification as he consigns their cosmopolitanism to enactment of stereotypes through global Christian culture, English language, Korean Wave, and Western fashion and music.

Such generalising representations, in both popular media and academic writings, have a tendency to obscure the contested and shifting nature of identities and belongingness in urban spaces and overlook the daily struggles and violence that migrants have to undergo in the city. As art historian Wu Hung argues, “cosmopolitanism...is far from a harmonious state of being produced by a desire for all-inclusiveness. Rather it is fundamentally a reality forced on the city; it encompasses contesting spaces, intentions, and attitudes that the city cannot escape.”⁴ Thus, this paper attempts to critically investigate the lens of cosmopolitanism that is often used to represent migrants from the Northeast region in Delhi. Such cosmopolitanism attributed to the migrants from the Northeast emanates from their racial and cultural otherness from what is generally considered as India “proper” or the “mainland.” Along with the

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spatial relegation of the migrants in cosmopolitan *mohallas* or neighbourhoods, their typecasting into certain skill sets in consonant with the needs of the neoliberal labour market add to their further “otherisation” as racial outsiders.

In the first section of *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contended that cosmopolitanism is a dominant class ideology that led to the destruction of national industries, literature, and civilizations in the hands of a single oppressive regime of production.⁵ In the neoliberal era, global cosmopolitan regime is a radicalisation of Anglo-American ideology of liberal internationalism. As Peter Gowan argues, this new cosmopolitanism “proposes a set of disciplinary regimes—characteristically dubbed, in the oleaginous jargon of the period, ‘global governance’—reaching deep into the economic, social and political life of the states subject to it, while safeguarding international flows of finance and trade.”⁶ For instance, in order to attract foreign capital, culture and traditions of old cities have been ruthlessly erased by urban planners and real estate developers to give them a world-class cosmopolitan appeal. The neoliberal counterpart of the cosmopolitan bourgeois travellers of liberal modernity are the immigrants, refugees, diasporic people, exiled or displaced populations who essentially constitute the “problem” rather than the heralds of multiculturalism.⁷ Yet, unlike the modern cosmopolitan elite, the legal status and sociocultural identity of the non-elite cosmopolitans are constantly put into question while local social practices and daily politics maintain their “otherness.” Cosmopolitanism, however, cannot be simply derided as an ideological instrument of capitalism or neo-imperialism, because a cosmopolitan world vision continues to be a necessary normative paradigm. Hence, there is a need to distinguish between descriptive and normative cosmopolitanisms, or between “new liberal” cosmopolitanism, which is based on exclusionary market fundamentalism, and “democratic” cosmopolitanism that is based on the project of inclusivity.⁸ Contemporary scholars of cosmopolitanism have, therefore, advocated for plural understandings of cosmopolitanism(s) in lieu of a single Western idea of abstract universalism.⁹ While scholars have variously used the concepts of vernacular, working-class or ordinary cosmopolitanism to conceptualise the practices of sociability from below, the notion of subaltern cosmopolitanism brings together these various conditions of “subaltern subjectivity where alternative cosmopolitan imaginations are rooted.”¹⁰

The central contention of this paper is that there is a fundamental disjuncture in representation, lived experiences as well as practices of cosmopolitanism among the racialised migrants that reveal the complexity of their subjectivities. This paper argues that the same visual regime of racialisation, rooted in the colonial and postcolonial practices of frontier making and racial anthropology that treats such migrants as racial “others” of the city attracts their labour into the cosmopolitan consumer spaces. The disjuncture in cosmopolitanism is far more evident when we consider the entrenched urban division of labour and the segregated housing market where the migrants are positioned against other migrants of the city. While their physical “otherness” is valorised in the capital city’s (Delhi) service industries, outside the economic spaces their “otherness” is effectively maintained through social discrimination

and violence. By linking these two paradoxical phenomena, this paper argues that cosmopolitanism signals a tendency of neoliberal capital to appropriate, commodify, and control the bodies and cultures of ethnic minorities. These twin processes of violent commodification and reinforcement of racialisation are, however, contested by migrants' own normative practices of cosmopolitanism. Their understanding of cosmopolitanism is based on their aspirations of the city, beyond the commodification of their "otherness" and thin identification with global popular culture as suggested by McDuié-Ra. This paper notes the emergence of a "pan-Northeastern identity", as suggested by several scholars, as one such practice of migrant cosmopolitanism that holds the possibility for a new politics of solidarity and belongingness but with its own racial limitations.¹¹

This paper is an extension of the fieldwork conducted from October 2019 to October 2021 that was resumed in May 2022 and was in progress at the time of writing this article. The fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2021 included both in-person and online interviews of 22 migrants (14 women and 8 men) from the Northeast who work in various service sectors in Delhi such as aviation, call centres, shopping malls, and hotels. Data from the ethnographic study that resumed in May 2022 entails in-depth interviews with around 80 interlocutors in a call centre located in Noida, Munirka village, and Humayunpur. The interlocutors included migrants from the Northeast, employers, co-workers, property brokers, and landlords among others. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section provides a brief genealogy of the "Northeast" as a racialised category from colonial and postcolonial to urban cosmopolitan constructions to contextualise the process of racialisation. The second section problematise the cosmopolitan constructions of the migrants and discusses the disjuncture and everyday violence faced by the migrants in the neighbourhoods perceived as cosmopolitan. The third section looks into the subaltern practices of cosmopolitanism among the migrants through the emergent "pan-Northeastern" identity and flags some of its major limitations.

The "Northeast" as a "Race": From Colonial and Postcolonial to Cosmopolitan Constructions

Just like the concept of race, the directional name "Northeast" of India is marked by projects of colonialism and nationalism and, according to Sanjib Baruah, do not evoke any "historical memory or collective consciousness" in a primordial sense.¹² In colonial accounts, the frontier region between Bengal and Burma, along with other areas in the Himalayan region, such as Nepal and Bhutan, were often referred to as the "Mongolian Fringe" despite the clear presence of people with non-Mongoloid features such as the caste Nepalese and the Bengali.¹³ The Mongoloid race, as applied to the populations of East and Central Asia, holds the status of inferiority and degradation in European racial hierarchy. Hence, the Mongolian Fringe of the Northeast came to be perceived as a backward geographical space inhabited by incorrigible and savage tribes who were biologically and culturally distant from the Indian mainland.

On the pretext of the incorrigibility and backwardness of the frontier, the colonial government had enacted a series of protective laws, such as the Inner Line Regulation (1873), that were inherited by the postcolonial state.¹⁴

The directional name was made official through the formation of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971 under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region to act as a statutory advisory body for the eight states in the region. Sikkim became the eighth state under the jurisdiction of the NEC after the North East Council (Amendment) Act 2002. Along with the legal and administrative structure, postcolonial India also inherited the unabashed racialised gaze towards the Northeast which led to the continued seclusion and isolation of the region from the rest of the country. India's first Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel famously wrote to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about his apprehensions of the "pro-Mongoloid prejudice" and the potential for trouble in the region in the wake of Indo-China conflicts.¹⁵ The official racialised gaze accompanied racial policies, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, for the severe securitisation of the region to contain potential troubles. As Papori Bora notes, "[y]ears of militarised violence through counter-insurgency operations have 'othered' the region as an internal enemy, accentuated by notions of cultural difference, which has also established a form of military racism."¹⁶ This blend of colonial and postcolonial racial gaze and security-oriented policies have constituted the people of the Northeast as "incomplete national subjects" by maintaining an "internal" form of colonialism.¹⁷

An increased out-migration from the region to the urban mainland since the early 2000s has generated a shift in the construction and constitution of the "Northeastern" from backward tribals to cosmopolitan service workers. Unofficial estimates suggest that there are around 9–11 lakh migrants from the region in Delhi NCR as of 2023.¹⁸ If we compare it with the estimates from 2011, the number of migrants has increased about fivefold.¹⁹ A study estimated that about 96 per cent of the Northeastern migrants are young people between the ages of 15–30, implying that the mass out-migration is a fairly recent phenomenon.²⁰ The trends in the data suggests that the phenomenon of mass labour out-migration from the Northeast region is characteristically an event of post-Liberalisation period, before which out-migration occurred on a much smaller scale and was limited to the political and educated elites.²¹

The construction of the "Northeastern" as a race is rearticulated in the urban mainland under new political economic conditions. As Ranabir Samaddar examines, migrants and refugees in the postcolonial age are absorbed in the labour market "as per the requirements of the global supply chains of commodities and labour."²² Migrants from the region now find themselves positioned in the demand for labour in the booming neoliberal service sector and the segregated urban housing market. The twin process of liberalising and urbanising Delhi into a world-class metropolis since the 1990s has led to the emergence of status-driven upper class and middle class consumerism. Air-conditioned consumer spaces like shopping malls, luxury hotels, up-market restaurants and cafés, and so on "promotes the 'foreign' as superior to the 'domestic' and, in turn, reflects and creates aspirations of 'success' as being

embedded in global identities.”²³ Racially profiled by their yellowish skin tones, epicanthic fold, and high cheekbones, the Mongoloid looking migrants from the Northeast, whose faces and physical aesthetics do not seem to embody Indianness, became the vehicles of these global identities, aesthetics, and aspirations as service providers.²⁴ Their sartorial choices are considered to be Western or Korean, and their disposition and demeanour are suitable for professional soft skills training that prepares them to endure volatile working environments. As they live away from their families in the search for career and livelihood, the young migrants, both men and women, are seemingly ready to dedicate themselves to odd-hour jobs, such as graveyard shifts and 24/7 work environments in the call centres, and on-call duty in the airlines’ industry.

The 2014 report by the M.P. Bezbaruah Committee notes: “There are many establishments which prefer to employ people from the North East with their oriental looks and knowledge of English. The people from the North East have a reputation for sincerity and reliability. The general impression is that they are ready to work for less remuneration.”²⁵ Besides corporate training agencies, the Central Government schemes have also begun to make inroads into the remote areas of the region to tap the presumed potential of Northeastern youth in hospitality, Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO), aviation, etc. especially under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.²⁶ In 2019, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology proposed a scheme to incentivise the establishment of the BPO industry in the Northeast region that would employ the youth in customer care jobs.²⁷ Under the neoliberal market regime, skill training is imparted to young underprivileged workers for low wage service sector jobs to craft them as suitable self-driven and pliant worker-citizens.²⁸ As Kikon and Karlsson argues, the cosmopolitan refined Northeastern face is the very commodity that the recruitment agency sells to the neoliberal hospitality sector.²⁹ State led initiatives of establishing corporate training institutes in the Northeast, therefore, signal the attempt at moulding a racialised population by essentialising their phenotypic difference as soft skills and mobilising their out-migration in the mainland cities and abroad. In the Indian service economy, the bodies of the un-Indian Mongoloid service workers, thereby, undergo racialisation to generate ethical and aesthetic values for consumerist cosmopolitanism. This commodified otherisation that entails a shift from the colonial trope of the savage or incorrigible tribals to the well-dressed pliant workers, has granted them access to the neoliberal urban spaces and forged a niche for them in the emerging new service sector.

A cosmopolitan status is then conferred upon localities and neighbourhoods where the migrants are accommodated. A weekly tabloid report on Northeastern localities in urban villages of Delhi claims, “Delhi is truly cosmopolitan.”³⁰ Delhi’s urban villages, also known as *lal doras* (which were so called because they were separated from the agricultural lands with *lal doras*, which means red chords), like Munirka, Humayunpur, and Kishangarh in the South, and Indra Vihar and Vijaynagar in the North, are erstwhile agricultural settlements owned by Jat and Gujjar communities that have become home to thousands of migrants from the Northeast. Despite the onslaught of

urbanisation in the capital city through the entry of global consumer culture and real estate projects, the urban villages have managed to preserve the look and character of villages through kinship-based networks such as *Khap Panchayat* and vernacular forms of capitalism.³¹ The increasing visibility of Mongoloid migrants in these urban villages and their placemaking practices through the setting up of petty businesses like grocery shops and restaurants over the years have transformed these urban villages into Northeastern localities or, as popularly called, Northeast ghettos. This small-scale entrepreneurialism of the migrants has attracted daily customers and clientele from neighbouring upper class gated communities, such as Safdarjung Enclave, Vasant Kunj and Defence Colony, who come to these urban villages to savour exotic, peculiar Northeastern food that one can experience “without having to travel abroad.”³²

Disjuncture and Violence Behind Cosmopolitan Mohallas

The packaging of racial and cultural diversity for the consumer market tells us little about the accommodation of migrants in the host society and whether there is an actual sense of sociability in these neighbourhoods. The shock of visibility of the young Mongoloid migrants in the city, the sudden exposure to their cultural practices, and their aesthetic valorisation in the neoliberal job market have not always been received as cosmopolitan. There is indeed a stark disjuncture in the racialised migrant experiences of urban cosmopolitanism—between their inclusion in the urban labour market and their constant exclusion from the imaginings of a hegemonic national community. As Stuart Hall revealed, people who are significantly different from the majority, those who constitute “them” rather than “us”, are frequently exposed to a “binary form of representation”: good or bad, cultured or primitive, ugly or exotically attractive, repelling or desirable and so on.³³ The spectacle of cosmopolitanism associated with Northeastern migrants is couched between the extremities of desire and repulsion that has led to layered forms of racial, cultural, and sexual violence.

Racial insecurity and alienation have pushed Northeastern migrants to cluster together in urban villages that “act as spaces of arrival through which migrants access the new urban setting,”³⁴ Yet, the local customs and mores of these villages continually put their civility, morality, and nationality into question and pressure them into a continuous process of negotiation and conflicts with the dominant local communities who consider the culture of the migrants as a threat to their own. Harsh Phogat, a local property owner and a former Resident Welfare Association member of Humayunpur opines,

People from other states have stopped renting apartments in this place. This is because Northeasterns who live here roam around the entire night and create a ruckus. Both boys and girls start around midnight, get drunk and kick around the standing scooters, and scratch the cars.³⁵

This paradox of cosmopolitan *mohallas*, where the entry of a group of migrants leads to the moving away of tenants from other states due to the

alleged civil nuisance created by the new tenants, further entails the exclusion of other racialised migrants.

Africans used to live here in the nineties before Northeastern people arrived. But we did not allow them to stay any longer because they sell drugs and do online fraud activities. Now they live around Uttam Nagar where the rent prices are cheaper and where locals are not aware of them.³⁶

Both African and Northeastern migrants are typecasted through the language of race and dominant Indian morality, yet both communities are pitted against each other in the urban housing market competition.³⁷ Behind the “exclusive enclaves” where people of ethnicities huddle together is in fact the spatial segregation of races who face quotidian racial exclusion. Select neighbourhoods are earmarked for migrants belonging to different ethnicities where minimal contact for basic economic transaction is maintained with the local populaces, which is far from cosmopolitan co-existence. Beyond these clusters their mobility is constricted as they have limited access to other parts of the city as Angela, a 29-year-old airhostess from Dimapur, explains,

It is only in Northeastern localities where we feel comparatively safer. If we go to other parts of the city, we face more discrimination. When I went to West Delhi to attend a colleague’s wedding, I felt gawked at by everyone. A friend from Manipur was looking for a room in that area to be closer to her office, but she had difficulty finding one because she is a Northeastern and they do not allow non-vegetarians.³⁸

Migrants are involved in everyday conflicts with the Jat, Gujjar, and Punjabi landlords regarding rent prices, moral policing of their food habits and dressing style and surveillance of their lifestyles. In 2005 the Delhi Police issued a controversial pamphlet containing “Security Tips for North East Students/Visitors in Delhi” asking migrants to avoid preparing “smelly food” such as bamboo shoots and *axone*, and, if they must, they were advised to do so “without creating ruckus in neighbourhood.”³⁹ Northeastern diet has long been controlled or prohibited in other spaces that are considered to be liberal or cosmopolitan. While canteens or messes in university campuses in Delhi have special days in a week when they serve South Indian, North Indian, Punjabi, and sometimes even Chinese food, Northeastern food is rarely a part of such multicultural performative practices.⁴⁰ Multinational BPO companies that hire Northeastern youths have cafeterias that provide a plethora of Indian and non-vegetarian foreign cuisines including Mexican, Italian, and Japanese but would strictly prohibit Northeastern food. Jessica Kamei from Manipur, a 28-year-old senior customer care executive in a call centre in Noida, shares,

Our trainer, who is from Assam, was planning to open a Northeastern stall in our office cafeteria but the authorities did not allow him. Because a majority of the employees are Northeasterns, they were probably afraid that opening a Northeastern stall would be a huge loss to the other stalls. They did not even allow a Nepali man to put up his momo stall outside the office building where

you will find many *chole bhatura* and *kulcha* stalls. They apparently chased him away after two days.⁴¹

The paradox of urban cosmopolitanism is that the ethnocentric dietary policing of the Northeastern migrants is shelved and sidelined when it comes to profiting from their exotic food and culture. Local landlords have capitalised on migrant food and culture through commercial rent from Northeastern restaurants, groceries and garment shops that throng these very neighbourhoods where locals and racial migrants cohabit. The valorisation of migrant bodies and their cultural practices is, thus, carried out in terms of the framework of cosmopolitanism offered by consumerist multiculturalism that is controlled by the tradition, mores and economic needs of the host societies. Ethnic practices and habits are permitted and endorsed only so long as it is packaged and made palatable as cosmopolitan commodities for those possessing the privileges of wealth and social capital to extract profit from it or indulge in it as exotic experiences. Yet, when migrants observe their own ethnic habits and practices as a part of their daily lifestyle, it is seen as a transgression of civility.

The apparent Western or Korean orientation of their clothes and fashion become a pretext of deducing racist perceptions about their sexuality and morality even in workplaces that value their expertise in grooming. Richard, a Manipur-born Associate Manager of Human Resources at a call centre in Noida expresses his concern about Northeastern women's sartorial choices in his office,

Because I am an HR person, many people come to me and complain that Northeastern girls wear too short and revealing clothes. What can I say? It's their life, their rules. But one has to be cognisant of dressing modestly in workplaces.⁴²

Jessica, who had been working in the same company was quick to refute the singling out of Northeastern women,

The working environment is very casual here. You can see the managers, directors, men, or women from the mainland also do not follow any dress code. They also wear baggy clothes or short dresses and have tattoos on their arms.⁴³

The tragic murder of Nido Taniam, the 20-year-old student from Arunachal Pradesh, transpired on the pretext of racist comments on his hairstyle and clothing. The three local men who murdered Taniam in a racial altercation had "mocked him for his longish, styli[s]ed, dyed hair, effeminate clothing, and East Asian physical features (by reportedly calling him "*chinkī*?)." ⁴⁴ The racist perceptions regarding Northeastern fashion and sexuality are also ingrained in state institutions as the controversial 2005 Delhi Police pamphlet reportedly had insensitive and racist injunctions pertaining to the "revealing" or "scanty" dressing sense of Northeastern women.

Subjected to constant surveillance on what they eat, dress, and consume, Northeastern migrants are also stigmatised for their jobs in the cosmopolitan industries. Workplaces like call centres, shopping malls, hotels and airlines, where young men and women work closely during odd-hours, are popularly imagined as erotically charged spaces “that encouraged licentious behaviour on the part of young people beyond the disciplining gaze of parents and community members.”⁴⁵ On the Facebook page of Helping Hands Society, an NGO for Northeast migrants, Robin Hibu, a highly revered Indian Police Services (IPS) officer from Arunachal Pradesh, posted about the “FLIGHTS OF FANCIES of some NE air hostesses.”⁴⁶ The original intent of the post was perhaps to alert Northeastern women about the vulnerabilities of living in the city and about the working conditions of the airlines industry. However, a greater part of the post was a ruthless stigmatisation of feminised service jobs, exemplifying the double patriarchal control over Northeastern women who, as Hibu writes, seems to be lost in the “ephemeral flight of fancies of midair life.”

This commodification of the migrant’s otherness is also manifest in a stark racialised division of labour that can be observed in the neoliberal service economy. While the servers and front desk workers in restaurants and cafés of the city are visibly Mongoloid or Northeastern, the platform delivery workers are predominantly from mainland states such as Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh.⁴⁷ The Mongoloid migrants from Northeast, whose bodies and food habits are deemed profitable and aesthetic for global capital and middle class consumption practices are glorified as cosmopolitan. And groups whose presence are reminders of the unwanted remnants of old customs and traditions and are deemed anti-cosmopolitan, such as poor migrants from Bihar and West Bengal, including the non-Mongoloid migrants from Assam, are pushed to the un-aesthetic, un-cosmopolitan underbellies of the city such as squatter settlements.⁴⁸

The racial fetishisation of Northeastern migrants have resulted in actual incidents of violence against Northeastern women. According to a survey conducted by Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, about 81 per cent of women from the Northeast faced various forms of harassment in Delhi which included harassment by landlords, verbal abuse, heckling and molestation.⁴⁹ Several of my women interlocutors have shared that even in the broad daylight they faced heckling on the streets and were asked “*Rate kītnā?* (How much do you charge for sexual services?).” Jessica had experienced a similar incident near Humayunpur village gate around 1:00 PM in the afternoon of August 2022. A young man, who appeared to be in his 30s, halted in front of her in a BMW car and solicited sexual services.⁵⁰ Jessica’s experiences further tell us about how Northeastern women experience sexual harassment even in workplaces,

Eve-teasing Northeastern girls is very common in our office. I have seen the trainers and team leaders trying to cosy up to the girls and touch them inappropriately...One day our floor manager came up to me to ask what I liked to do on the weekends and tried to invite me on a date. The guy is even married with kids...we cannot complain because we cannot provide proof of

such gestures, and we have to act nice to them because they are the ones who decide our monthly incentives.⁵¹

The perceptions about their promiscuous morality and hypersexual nature are then utilised to make justifications for the mental, physical, and sexual violence against the Northeastern migrants. They are presumed to be easy-going, as Jessica's landlord Devender Singh tried to condescendingly explain to us,

Out of a hundred, ninety-nine Northeastern girls consume alcohol, but in our community probably only two or three girls. That is the reason why they (*molesters*) think you are easy, and alcohol is the reason for such incidents.⁵²

In serious instances of violence, Northeastern women are presumed to be soliciting sex or have an active sexual life as exemplified by a 2009 verdict of the 2005 Dhaula Kuan rape case of a young woman from Mizoram.⁵³ The racial logic of sexual violence is that Northeastern women are already hypersexual and, hence, "impenetrable" or that rape does not count, and authorities such as the police and college administration impose cultural and moral rules upon them through continuous surveillance.⁵⁴

Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: A Pan-Northeastern Identity

As Shail Mayaram argues, there is a need to draw a line between cosmopolitanism as a descriptive category and a normative category, between the cosmopolitanism of the democratic activists and that of the global corporate interest, because in a descriptive sense even terror and violence are rendered as cosmopolitan.⁵⁵ Neoliberal capitalism works to selectively absorb, control, and confine migrants as cosmopolitan or unc cosmopolitan subjects. However, it also generates conditions to shape new identities and solidarities, fostering normative practices of sociability. Migrants contest their otherisation as passive neoliberal cosmopolitan subjects by actively creating meaningful cross-cultural human interactions. Rishi, a 27-years-old customer service associate from Nagaland, posed me the question,

A metropolitan city by its nature is cosmopolitan and everyone living in the city experiences cosmopolitanism so why are Northeasterns exceptionalised?⁵⁶

In a neoliberal city that remains invested in creating and recreating divisions for profit extraction, migrants seek that inclusivity among those with shared experiences of marginality. The normative elements of cosmopolitanism are already evident in scholars' suggestion of an emerging pan-Northeastern identity. By subverting the earlier inferiorising connotations of the geopolitical term Northeast, migrants in the new urban settings have rearticulated the term through self-identification.⁵⁷ The identity is subaltern and cosmopolitan as it embraces people of other racialised communities by defying geopolitical and

cultural confines, such as migrants from Ladakh, Darjeeling, Nepal, Myanmar, and Tibet.⁵⁸ They co-create common places and common identity through cohabitation, business partnerships, and civic associations with communities “with no shared collective consciousness” or communities with whom they have historically antagonistic relations at home. After completing his graduation from Delhi University in 2016, Rishi opened a made-to-order garment shop in Kamla Nagar locality of Delhi’s North Campus with his friends from Manipur whom he met in college.

I have become accustomed to other cultures of Northeast only after coming to Delhi. We connect because we come from the same far-off region, and share similar cultures, and taste buds. But...I (also) have North Indian friends and co-workers, and my roommate was from Bihar. Luckily, they have always been kind to me, and I have never found myself separate from them. I have learned a lot from them.⁵⁹

As a migrant, Rishi’s understanding of cosmopolitanism is in line with the cosmopolitan identity defined by sociologist Ulrich Beck as “the self-understanding of persons who, while they have ethnic and cultural roots, are aware of themselves as having crossed and continuing to cross between groups, being influenced by experiences and encounters with other cultures, ethnicities, genders, and circumstances, and who are never firmly entrenched and wholly enclosed in only one group.”⁶⁰

Born in Diyun, Arunachal Pradesh, Raju is a third-generation Chakma refugee, who runs one of the busiest *laphing* (a Tibetan snack that has become popular among migrants) stands in Humayunpur. The Chakma community has been facing state-sponsored discrimination and racial profiling since they migrated to India after facing communal violence and displacement in Bangladesh.⁶¹ Raju claims,

I am an *original* Northeastern because I was born in Arunachal Pradesh, but we are not considered as citizens there; they still perceive us as refugees... This is why people of our community go outside the state to seek a living. In Delhi it is different. People from different tribes of Arunachal and other Northeastern communities visit our stalls, they are our friends.⁶²

Raju’s embodiment of complex identities is a testimony to the complex politics of belongingness, indigeneity, and citizenship in the Northeast. The assertion of his identity as a Northeastern in Delhi, while being a prayer for citizenship, is an illustration of how the acute sense of power relations between communities gets softened when they move away from home. Such practices of mutual coexistence have the potential to transgress established legal and political barriers between people. Raju’s legal status as a refugee did not bar him from membership and involvement with the Northeast Association of Humayunpur, which is a collective of small business owners and residents from the Northeast.

Cosmopolitanism based on this pan-identity, however, also remains fragile and contested as urban coexistence may be informed by the dynamics of

regional politics at home. Northeast continues to be rife with ethnic clashes and identitarian conflicts which led some scholars to put the tangibility and purpose of this identity into question.⁶³ The large-scale communal violence that has erupted in Manipur since May 3, 2023, between the Meitei and Kuki-Hmar-Zomi communities had immediate repercussions in Delhi. In a student locality of North Delhi, a group of Kuki students, three girls and six boys, were allegedly surrounded by a mob of thirty Meitei boys who snatched their phones, assaulted the boys, and threatened to rape the women.⁶⁴ Kim Singson, a Kuki student, who was present during the incident expressed her dismay over the violence spreading in Delhi,

We were very shocked because we thought that people who have the privilege to come to Delhi for education would understand; we did not expect any violence to happen at least in a student area like North Campus...At a metro station, some random Meitei men had asked for my friends' ID cards when they heard them talking in Kuki. The next day, a Meitei guy called the police complaining about my Kuki friends. At that time my friends were just chatting outside the college after their exams were over. The police came and scolded the guy instead as there was no sign of threat, but it shows that probably the Meiteis in Delhi are also scared.⁶⁵

Kim and her friends' experiences show that racial profiling can also occur within the migrant community for reasons that are informed by local politics at home. Moreover, not all people in the Northeast share the stereotypical Mongoloid phenotype, for example, caste Nepalese, Assamese, and Bengalis, or people with mixed parentage, who might blend in with the mainland Indians, escape racial profiling and may even be considered as outsiders within the migrant community. For instance, in a sports week organised by the Northeastern students at the University of Delhi in April 2023, a team that majorly consisted of young men from Assam were jeered as "Outsiders! Outsiders!" by the other Northeastern state team as they did not fit the physical stereotype of Mongoloid Northeastern.⁶⁶ The competitive environment of sportsmanship gave way to underlying racial exclusivity within the migrant community. There are other marginalised groups in Northeast India who do not fit the standard trope of the cosmopolitan Mongoloid migrant and face worse forms of racial profiling and labour exploitation in Indian cities, such as Bengali-speaking Muslims who are routinely discriminated as suspect citizens or "illegal immigrants" both within and outside the Northeast.⁶⁷ Racial politics is both the common and dividing subject between Mongoloid and non-Mongoloid Muslim migrants because, while both groups face otherisation and labour exploitation through racist ideologies, both groups are differentiated through racist indigenous politics in the region.⁶⁸ If the urban pan-Northeastern community can encompass people beyond geographical borders in mutual experiences of racial prejudice, it should also embrace other racialised people from the region. This normative vision already exists among the pan-Northeastern associations. Following the incident at North Campus, student bodies in Delhi called for collective attempts at resolving the conflict, as a statement by the North East Society of a college in Delhi University reads,

It is important to remember that peaceful reconciliation of all conflicts should be the ultimate goal rather than resorting to violence and aggression. Northeast India is a celebration of cultural diversity, and communal strife has no place there...As a community, we must work together to promote peace, understanding, and mutual respect, and to reject any attempts to create divisions based on religion, ethnicity, or any other differences.⁶⁹

It is necessary for these pan-affiliations to acknowledge the fragile and ephemeral nature of the pan-identity and power relations that exist back home because, as Craig Calhoun argues, democratic cosmopolitanism thrives on discursive engagement and deeper recognition across lines of differences rather than overcoming those differences.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Cosmopolitanism is, thus, a tendency of neoliberal capital to appropriate, commodify, and control bodies and cultures of communities that come from marginal socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The neoliberal cosmopolitan construction of the Northeastern migrants creates and sustains archaic and new forms of prejudices and biases while perpetuating discrimination and violence. Social groups whose bodies, cultural norms, and practices are deemed profitable and aesthetic for global capital, multicultural politics, and middle class consumption are glorified as cosmopolitan. The un-Indian physical appeal and their exotic cultures are valorised as enhancing the cosmopolitan aesthetic of the city, whether in the service industries or commercial alleys of the urban villages. However, when the migrants observe these same cultural and traditional habits as a part of their everyday existence, it is viewed as a transgression of tradition and morality. This cosmopolitanism is, thus, essentially a process of commodification of the migrants' racial otherness and their perceived hypersexuality that has resulted in further discrimination and various forms of racial, sexual, and physical violence. Furthermore, their own cosmopolitan practices in the form of an emergent pan-Northeastern identity further reveal the complexities of their agency that contest their cosmopolitan objectification. The new form of subaltern solidarity opens up the avenue for a new politics of belongingness but has some inherent limitations and contestations. Critical investigations of the everyday practices of sociability and the study of how different migrant, refugee and/or host populations coexist, therefore, hold the potential to reveal not only the complicated nature of insider-outsider politics but also bring to light emergent subjectivities and complex locations of agency in neoliberal cities.

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Notes

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³ Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (Amsterdam: IAS/Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

⁴ Wu Hung, “Zhang Dali’s Dialogue: Conversation with a City,” in *Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 206–7.

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¹⁴ Kham Khan Suan Hausing, “Framing the North-East in Indian Politics: Beyond the Integration Framework,” *Studies in Indian Politics* 3, no. 2 (December 2015): 277–83.

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¹⁷ Paporí Bora, “Between the Human, the Citizen and the Tribal,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, (2010): 341–60.

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³⁴ Rohini Rai, “Racializing Space, Spatializing ‘Race’: Racialization, its Urban Spatialization, and the Making of ‘Northeastern’ Identity In ‘World Class’ Delhi,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 15 (May 2023): 3271–92.

³⁵ Harsh Phogat, interview with the author on September 10, 2022, Humayunpur, Delhi.

³⁶ Harsh Phogat, September 10, 2022.

³⁷ Urban anthropologist Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan in his work on Delhi’s hip-hop culture writes of similar instances where apartments were rented to “Northeasterners (as well as Tibetans and Nepalis) only after it became evident that the only other option for the landlord was to rent the flat to an African national.” See, Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan, *The Globally Familiar: Digital Hip Hop, Masculinity, and Urban Space in Delhi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Rohit Negi, and Persis Taraporevala. “Window to a South-South World: Ordinary Gentrification and African Migrants in Delhi” in *Migration and Agency in a Globalizing World: Afro-Asian Encounters*, eds. Scarlett Cornelissen, and Yoichi Mine (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 209–30.

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³⁹ Cited from Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (Amsterdam: IAS/Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ College and university campuses across cities in India, including the Northeast region such as North-Eastern Hill University and Mizoram University, have assigned separate messes or kitchens to Northeastern students for consumption of their “ethnic” food so as to not offend “others.” See, R.K. Debbarma, “How Not to Fight Discrimination in India,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 51, no. 26/27, (June 25–July 2, 2016): 25–9. As Kikon argues, the issue with Northeastern food is not an issue of legality but that of civility or moral standards that are indubitably founded on hegemonic Brahmanical caste practices of vegetarianism and hygiene, the same practices that discriminate and suppress the dietary practices of lower castes and Muslims. See, Dolly Kikon, “Dirty Food: Racism and Casteism in India,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 2 (2022): 278–97.

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⁴² Richard, interview with author on April 17, 2023, Noida. Also see, Jyoti Puri, “Stakes and States: Sexual Discourses from New Delhi,” *Feminist Review* 83 (2006): 139–48.

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⁴⁴ Palash Ghosh, “Nido Tania: Was Killing of Student in Delhi A Hate Crime?” *International Business Time*, February 13, 2014.

⁴⁵ Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta, “Intimate Encounters: Affective Labor in Call Centers.” *Positions* 24, no. 1 (February 2016): 32.

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https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1308956212876359&id=153036281801697&__tn__=R

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⁴⁸ Ayona Datta, ““Mongrel City”: Cosmopolitan Neighbourliness in a Delhi Squatter Settlement,” *Antipode* 44, no. 3 (August 2011): 1–22.

⁴⁹ Manash Pratim Gohain, “81% of Northeast Women Harassed in Delhi: Survey,” *The Times of India*, January 24, 2014.

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⁵⁷ Rai, "Racializing Space," 3271–92.

⁵⁸ McDuié-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*, 2012; Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation*; Wouters and Subba, "The 'Indian Face'," 1–15.

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⁶⁶ Smita from Assam (a participant at the sports week), interview with author on 4 May 2023, Vijay Nagar.

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