

A Short-spanned Career and a Blurry Future: Migrants from North East India in Hospitality and Retail

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ABSTRACT

Young men and women from India's north-east are a significant presence as hospitality and retail workers in major cities of India, standing outside restaurants as hosts or tip-toeing around in busy shop-floors, working as veins of the neo-liberal service economy, composed in their demeanour and well-groomed in appearance. This category of workers has been studied through various lenses, such as interactive services, aesthetic labour, and emotional labour. The present paper uses these as conceptual tools to locate migrants from the North-East in the concerned occupational sector and understand their position in terms of career aspirations and job security. The research is qualitative and based on a series of interviews and informal conversations with men and women from the North-East working in different retail spaces like shopping malls, restaurants, and salons in Delhi, as well as individuals who have returned to their hometowns after working a few years in the industry. The study's findings draw attention to the complex relationships between identities, employment, and aspirations.

Keywords: Out-migration, North-East India, North-East migrants, hospitality and retail jobs, livelihood and aspirations, job insecurity.

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INTRODUCTION

Movement of people from north-east India to the popular and more developed cities of southern, western and northern India has seen a marked increase after the liberalisation of the Indian economy which resulted in a boom of the private and service sector. (Remesh, 2012, McDuire-Ra, 2012). Before liberalisation of the Indian economy, migration of people from the North-East[†] to the metro cities were few and mostly education-related or related to Government services boosted by the implementation of reservation polities (Angelove, 2015). As MNCs and international brands proliferated in the Indian economy, specifically in the major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata and Pune, a large and comprehensive market for skilled and semi-skilled labour was created. Therefore the shift from an agriculture and production based economy to a service based economy resulted in a new form of migration that was different from the earlier education based migration of the elite or migration of highly educated-skilled workers at the higher ends and the migration of poor, uneducated and unskilled labourers, mostly to work in factories, mines, plantations, construction sites, etc. in the bottom ends; now, to a large group of migrants who are moderately or lowly educated contributing to semi-skilled labour of the service economy. Women, mostly young and unmarried, constitute a significant portion of this group of migrants (Mukherjee and Dutta, 2017; Marchang, 2017).

The present paper attempts to understand experiences of migrants from the North-East, working in the service industry, like hospitality and retail, in terms of its influence on the workers' subjectivities and aspirations. The research is qualitative and exploratory in nature and

[†] The north-eastern part of India, comprising of the seven neighbouring states, lying beyond the 'chicken's neck' siliguri corridor of West Bengal, and including Sikkim, are commonly and collectively referred to variously as 'the Northeast', 'North-East Region' (NER), 'North-East India' etc. The collective categorization of these individually distinct and independent states have been subject to multiple debates, but nevertheless the terms are popularly used in colloquial as well academic discourses. In this paper, 'the North-East' or 'North-East India' or 'NER' have been used to imply the same, however, acknowledging that it is not to be taken as a homogenous category.

is based on a series of interviews and informal conversations with men and women from the North-East working in different retail spaces like shopping malls, restaurants and salons in Delhi, and individuals who have returned to their home-towns after having worked a few years in the industry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURES

Migrants from North-East India

A study on migrants from Tangkhul community in the Ukhrul district of Manipur to Delhi found that development in communication technology and increased rate of education, combined with a slow growth in opportunities for employment is creating a phenomenon of 'chain migration' to bigger cities of India, particularly Delhi and more than ninety per cent of this population fall in the age-group of 15-29 years and few among them are married (Marchang, 2011). Further, Marchang's study found that, among this group, male migrants choose to work in call centres or BPOs whereas the female migrants, who are relatively less educated seek "employment at a younger age (compared to males) due to either domestic economic pressures or their reluctance to pursue higher studies...mostly work in private shops, hotels, restaurants, parlours and alike constituting about 62 per cent of the workforce" (Marchang, 2011).

In Delhi, Vijay Nagar, Humanyunpur, Munirka, Moti Bagh and Kotla Mubarakpur are some of the most popular locations among Northeasterners[‡], where a large number of the migrants reside. Over the years these places have manifested themselves as hubs of northeasterners reflecting their strength in numbers and agency. Duncan McDuieRa's ethnographic work on Northeast migrants in Delhi gives a narrative account of northeasterners living in

[‡] This term is being used, in this study, to refer to migrants from North-East India, specifically, those who have reported any of the eight north-eastern states as their 'native place'. The term is often problematized for carrying racial-stereotypical meanings and being exclusive in nature. In the present study, however, it is being used simply as an analytical tool to look at how it is interpreted by the concerned migrant workers and also to reflect the similarities of their experiences.

Humayunpur and describes the various ways of the migrants' "place-making in the city" (Mc Duie-Ra, 2012). Characterised by narrow lanes with congested housing structures and several shops selling food-items and articles of daily use typically for northeasterners, many of these being brought all the way from the NER, that are not usually found elsewhere in the city, it is quite common to find Northeasterners working as shopkeepers or shop owners in these places unlike elsewhere in the city where a Northeasterner, barring some shanty food stalls selling Momo, Noodles, etc., may serve as a helper in a shop or restaurant but rarely as a shop-owner. However, Northeasterners rarely own properties in the city (Mcduie-Ra, 2012).

Although a large majority of this migrant group reside in the localities mentioned above, it would be wrong to assume that Northeasterners are confined to these places. While these localities, providing cheap housing, are usually preferred by students, low to medium-paid workers and new migrants, there is a significant proportion of Northeasterners working in higher paying occupations, mostly as government employees (Remesh 2012; Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2016) who can afford to live in the more developed and non-ghetto-like[§] localities (probably on account of stability of income, better social securities and wider social networks, besides the better financial capacities) and are therefore spread all across the city. The unavailability of systematic records of migrants from NER make the tracing difficult and therefore any attempt to study about people coming from the northeastern states easily leads one to the areas where they are highly concentrated and therefore, most visible. Such places are preferred by the migrants for their low housing rents and reputation of offering a safer and home-like

[§] The term ghetto was used by Louis Wirth (1927) to describe the maintenance of social cohesion among people of ethnic minorities in a city (Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017).

environment for Northeasterners as many of these migrants sharing cultural similarities and understanding can live close together (McDuie-Ra, 2012, Remesh, 2012, Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017).

Studies on Northeasterners living in Delhi have revealed that almost all of them have faced discrimination, harassment, abuse or insult, in some or the other form, on the basis of their ethnic identity (McDuie-Ra, 2012, Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017). Nation-wide attention to this particular form of discrimination and abuse seems to have grown only after the attack on a 19 year old Arunachal-based student of Delhi University in a crowded South Delhi market by a group of shopkeepers which led to his tragic death in January 2014. Women from the region have been victims of a double vulnerability on the basis of their ethnicity as well as gender. A toxic patriarchy, that has repeatedly reflected itself in the form of gender-based discriminations and violence in this part of the country, views Northeastern women to be of 'loose morality' due to their friendly behaviour and easy intermixing with other (male) Northeasterners (McDuie-Ra, 2012, Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017), who come from societies where gender norms are less restrictive in nature. "The predicament Northeastern women face appears to be part of an imagined conflation between 'Mongoloid hill-dwellers' and 'sexual liberty'. The hills have been depicted, and are still imagined, as a place where a certain frankness is common, moral norms comparatively laxer, and less reticence is practised between the sexes, even though influential church leaders in the region now preach premarital abstinence and moral restraint...When Northeastern females leave their home states for India's cities, this image travels with them, and often defines them in the eyes of the local population" (Wouters & Subba, 2013). Thus, women from the North-East often find themselves in a situation of double jeopardy where certain prejudices based on gender and racial imaginations threaten their sense of respect and safety.

Through a rich ethnographic recounting of narratives of young 'indigenous' migrants and their families living in the North-East, Kikon and Karlsson throw light on different shades of aspirations, anxieties and hardships that the migrants and their families encounter in the long and continuous process characteristic of this type of migration. Their focus is on the whole process of migration,

besides experiences of hospitality and service workers- the work brings out what these job prospects and mobility mean to the migrants and their families, and reflects upon the migrants' constant struggle towards 'wayfinding' for a better life (Kikon and Karlsson, 2019). Bardalai (2021) outlines structures and processes that operate within a shopping mall where workers engage in a process of 'self-making' and 'perform' class as per the business objectives and clientele of their respective retail brands or organisations. The study narrates how initial aspirations and enthusiasm of workers transcend into a later realisation of precarity and false promises of upward social mobility in their jobs.

Neo-liberal service industry or the New Service Economy

Linda McDowell (2009) discusses the nature of the new service economy in terms of embodiment and suggests that what differentiates the bodily labour of the new economy from that of the industrial era is its feminization, i.e., While earlier bodily labour constituting the bottom end of the economic hierarchy was essentially a domain of men and so associated with masculinity and toughness, bodily labour in the service economy, most of which still bear a low status and are lowly paid, has come to be associated with 'feminine' skills of empathy and care (McDowell 2009). McDowell further notes that the shift from manufacturing to service economies, because of its casual nature of employment, has diminished the chances for poorly educated workers to have permanent employment in jobs that provide a decent standard of living. This assumption needs to be critically assessed since in the new economy there appears a greater number of job options for those without educational qualifications than in the previous phase, although of casual nature, these jobs could be providing better chances of a decent standard of living than the manual jobs of the manufacturing economy, particularly in urban India (Ramaswamy, 2013). Studies conducted on workers of the hospitality and retails sectors have often discussed these professional roles in terms of their nature and demands for emotional and aesthetic labour (Nickson & Warhurst, 2001; Nath, 2011; Weller, 2007). Aesthetic labour has been conceptualised as the "employment of workers with certain embodied capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers and which are then organizationally mobilised,

developed and commodified (Nickson et al., 2001)" (Nickson & Warhurst, 2007). Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson in their article 'Employee Experience of Aesthetic Labour in Retail and Hospitality' explain how interactive character in these jobs lead to the designing of the roles of the workers in such a way that aesthetically appeals to its customers. Not only are workers trained to dress, talk and behave in specific standardised ways but are mostly recruited on the basis of their appearances. Most of the problems associated with jobs in the service sector comes from the nature of employment especially when it is contractual or part-time based. This aspect of interactive jobs can be found in a work by Zeitinoglu et al (2004), which deals with the issue of stress among workers in the food, clothing and generalised merchandise retail in Ontario, Canada, where the workers are in direct contact with the customers. The authors define stress in terms of "...the self-reported symptoms occurring as a result of transactions between the individual and the environment" and takes into account symptoms such as "exhaustion, burnout, inability to sleep, lack of energy, feeling like there is nothing more to give, wanting to cry, difficulties with concentration, feelings of anger and helplessness, irritability, anxiety, feeling dizzy and feeling a lack of control over one's life". A number of factor have been found to be the major causes of the stress such as job insecurity among part-time and casual workers, irregular hours of work and the inability to schedule other commitments in between those hours, differences in wages and benefits, physical effort involved in the job such as long hour of standing, constant exposure to artificial air cooling systems affecting health, constant work surveillance, difficulty in managing work and family, etc. the study goes on to suggest that employers should be compensated on the basis of the tasks they perform and not depending on their position as part-time, casual or permanent employers; split-shifts should be avoided so that the workers find it easier to manage time for personal commitments, gender discriminations should be avoided and make the work environment safer and healthier for the workers (Zeitinoglu et.al., 2004). Nandini Gooptu argues that such new workplaces in India like the shopping mall, by adopting market-driven and business friendly policies reshape individual subjectivity in its workers and citizens 'consonant with the needs of the market and of neo-liberal governmentality for self-governing citizens and self-driven pliant

workers' (Gooptu, 2009). The author opines that through a corporate-like work regime that demands individual hard work without the limitations of time and a culture of competition, continuous evaluation and peer-group surveillance, a neo-liberal subjectivity is crafted where one needs to challenge one's own self and develop a persona that feeds the upper-class consumerist taste. According to a study of shopping malls in Israel, the employers of the malls, in order to appeal to their Israeli-Palestinian clientele, recruit women of the same ethnic group, usually from their own middle-class client-base, so as to appeal to 'similar audiences' . Despite the working conditions and pay at these organisations being very low, the Israeli Palestinian women , even when they are overqualified for the job, show a willingness to work here which the authors explain being related to their feeling of comfort and acquaintance towards particular products and the enclosed and aesthetic working space (Marantz, Kalev & Lewin-Epstein 2014). Evidently, this is very different from the situation in India, where recruitment for these jobs occur mostly from the lower income groups, usually young boys and girls, who otherwise do not own the material resources required to shop at these malls.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on semi structured and in-depth interviews conducted in the years 2021 and 2022. The study is located in some of the popular market places in South Delhi like Hauz Khas Village and Connaught Place where a large number of cafes, restaurant and retail stores of international fashion brands are found, shopping malls like MGF Metropolitan, Select City Walk and DLF Place malls in Saket; and Ambience mall and DLF Promenade in Vasant Kunj; and market areas of Munirka and Humayunpur, where a large number of shops, eateries and salons are owned or run by people from the North East. A total of 50 interviews have been conducted which includes 29 women and 21 men who are currently staying in Delhi and working in this field. The difference between the numbers of female and male respondents points towards a larger presence of women, particularly among the Northeast migrant workers in the retail industry. Eight returned migrants, who have previously worked in this field but have now returned to their home-towns, have also been traced through snowballing and contacted for

interviews, in order to gain an insight on after-return experiences. However, due to the small sample size of returned migrants, they are not included in the core part of the analysis. Quantitative analyses in the paper are only based on the 50 participants who are currently living and working in Delhi. This is being done to avoid mixing up data and to avoid errors that could result from the time-lapse since their time of leaving Delhi which could also affect one's perceptions and interpretation of experiences.

Sampling of the study was done by visiting different stores and restaurants in the above-mentioned malls and market-places and enquiring the store managers and staff about which state they come from and whether there is anyone from any of the Northeastern states working there. The idea was to make the sample as inclusive as possible and avoid any biases based on ethnicity or gender. However, it is seen that a majority of the participants are from the state of Manipur (22), followed by Nagaland (10) and the remaining are from Sikkim, Mizoram, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh; no individuals from the states of Meghalaya and Tripura could be found for this study, which reflects their rare or marginal presence in this sector, in the city of New Delhi.

Table 1: Classification of participants on the basis of their place of origin and gender

State	Female	Male	Total
Assam	1	3	4
Arunachal Pradesh	3	0	3
Manipur	15	7	22
Meghalaya	0	0	0
Mizoram	3	2	5
Nagaland	3	7	10
Sikkim	4	2	6
Tripura	0	0	0
Total Participants	29	21	50

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Migration and Search for livelihood

To find out what are the primary reasons for migration, the participants were encouraged to share their stories of what their lives were like before coming to Delhi and what motivated them to make the move. It is found that poverty is certainly not the primary cause of this category of migration as all the participants in this study have completed their primary education and about 40 percent of the participants are diploma or bachelor degree holders. Also, the migrants come from families who at least have some cultivable land of their own, and therefore are able to sustain themselves even in the absence of a formal job. Also, while it is true that most of them send some amount of their income for their families back home, none of the participants have claimed to be the only earning member of the family, which means that their earning is mostly complementary to the family income.

Participants of this study describe their migration journey to have been initially inspired or supported by relatives or acquaintances who were already working in Delhi or other metropolitan cities of India. The migrants were either directly encouraged (and supported) by their older siblings, relatives or friends who worked in the cities, or the inspiration came indirectly by watching such relatives or acquaintances who seemed to have some visible changes in their personalities or behaviour and emitted a sense of positive development in their lives, thus becoming role models and sources of inspiration and motivation for the other young individuals in their hometowns or villages. Therefore, the category of migrants who form the subject of this study can be understood as instances of chain migration.

When the participants talk about their migration journey, of what motivated them to move to Delhi, they talk about how inspired they felt seeing their fellow young men and women from the village who came home during their leaves or after leaving their city jobs. "My (cousin) sister used to tell me that you get everything you need right outside your doorstep and how you can easily travel in the metro (rail) to reach anywhere across Delhi. I really wanted to experience all these", says 23 years old Jenny. For Tangsoi (21 years old), the

newly developed look of confidence on this friends who became 'city-boys', gave him the idea that going to a bigger city would open several doors of opportunities for him and allow him to be a new person, far better than what his village in the hills could offer. Therefore, non-economic factors like the desire to experience city life, to find better opportunities in terms of career and self-development, etc. also play equally important roles as reasons for migration.

Social networks of kith and kin also play the important role of being agents of socialisation, helping the new migrants in finding accommodation, livelihood and developing new social networks in the host city. Job finding process for the retail and service workers, here, essentially involves references from 'cousins' and 'friends' working in the sector and none of the participants mention taking help of any formal job advertisement for recruitment agencies, be it for their first job or any subsequent job.

Grooming and Aesthetics

Grooming and aesthetics is integral to the employment and identities of employees in this industry. A stylish yet decent-looking hairstyle, neat and tucked uniforms (most often formal Western-styled clothing), and subtle facial make-up for women ensure that an appearance of 'professionalism' is executed by the workers who are believed to represent the business standards of the companies for which they work. Neha (name changed), a 31 years old woman from Sikkim who is working as a shopping assistant of a clothing store in a shopping Mall in Vasant kunj reflects, "We have to make sure to wear make-up but not too much, the eye make-up or lipstick colour should be kept light otherwise it might look cheap and also does not match with the uniform (*white shirt and black trouser*). You see our customers are rich people so they know these things". Her words reflect the organisation's marketing strategy of designing its services, which also includes the appearance of its service staff, to cater to a certain category of clientele with distinct aesthetic taste. This also shows how certain cultural meanings with respect to class and aesthetics are socialised by corporate organisations into their employees and further into the society, and aligning the sentiments of the workers with that of the market sentiment.

An attempt was made to find out what kind of changes the workers experience in themselves, as an outcome of training and activities involved in the job. When this question was directly asked to the participants of the study one thought was unanimously echoed in all the responses and that is an improved self-confidence, which was expressed through opinions like ‘my speaking skills have improved’, ‘I feel more independent’, ‘I have better dressing sense now’, ‘I have become more confident’, etc. It is important to understand that the particular segment of workers that this research is dealing with mainly comes from lower or lower middle class families whose parents’ source of livelihood are mostly of low-income nature like subsistence agriculture, workers in handloom or handicraft sector, driver, clerical jobs in private or government offices, etc. in some cases, which is much lower in numbers, occupations like school teacher, owner of small businesses like local shop, etc. have also been found in the responses. Hailing from these not very affluent families, the participants are lowly educated, mostly up till the higher secondary level and very few diploma or bachelor degree holders. For these workers, increase of confidence means a boost in their ability to interact with the cultural others in their day-to-day lives and a sense of being at par with the ‘mainlanders’ who, in the collective conscience of their native societies appear to be distant, different and socio-economically more advanced and powerful. Many participants, male and female, have also reported to have developed a better sense of dressing up or self-styling. The enhancement in self-image comes from being a part of the constructed cultural landscape characteristic of these up-scale/high-class consumerist spaces.

Table 2: Gender-wise distribution of participants on the basis of their workplace type and level of job satisfaction

Type of Workplace	Low Job Satisfaction		Medium Job satisfaction		High Job Satisfaction		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
(Within a shopping mall)							
Café/ Restaurant			1		4	2	7

Type of Workplace	Low Job Satisfaction		Medium Job satisfaction		High Job Satisfaction		Total
Retail Store			1	3	4	3	11
Spa			1		3		4
Beauty Salon				1	1		2
(Other Places)							
Café/ Restaurant	2	2	2	1	1	3	11
Retail Store	1			2	2	2	7
Beauty Salon			1	1	3	2	7
Total	3	2	6	8	18	12	49

(Note: One participant who is a woman working in a departmental store in Connaught Place refrained from responding to the question on level of job satisfaction, and thus the total number of participants shown in the above table is 49 instead of 50).

Interestingly, it is observed that retail workers of the shopping malls manifest a higher satisfaction with their job and seem to be more positively motivated towards their career, in comparison with those who are working for similar brands or in similar job roles but in open market places (shown under the broader category of 'Other Places' in Table 2) like Connaught Place, Hauz Khaas market, Munirka or Humayunpur. This observation is based on responses to questions using a five-point Lickert scale (where, 1=very low/very bad and 5=very high/very good) to rate the participants' level of satisfaction with their current job. In the given table, 'low job satisfaction' includes responses of participants corresponding to 1 and 2 on the Lickert scale, 'medium job satisfaction' includes responses marked as 3, and 'high job satisfaction' includes responses marked as 4 or 5. 70.83 per cent of the participants working in the 'within a shopping mall' category claim to be experiencing high levels of job satisfaction,

whereas, in the 'other places' category only 52 per cent of the workers have claimed a high job satisfaction level.

This difference can be attributed to the kind of ambience maintained inside a mall with its centralised air conditioning, ambient music and a refreshing fragrance in the air. Apart from these, the high security system also ensures exclusive access keeping out 'unwanted' by-passers like street vendors, beggars and the working class. All of these contribute in making the shopping malls seem like a sophisticated and safe space where workers as well as the customers can experience a neat and clean cosmopolitan environment, oblivious to the less appealing realities outside. This shows how a workplace environment can affect a worker's sense of self and her/his attitude towards the job. In terms of nature of work no significant difference was observed between the two categories of retail workers mentioned above.

The research also finds that a worker's perception of job satisfaction tends to be affected by their relationship with co-workers. In case of the workplaces categorised under 'other places' in the above table, interestingly, most of the workers who have shown a high level of job satisfaction are from retail spaces located in Humayunpur or Munirka, where the working staff are majorly from the Northeastern states, including managers and, in some cases, even the owner of the business.

Interactions and Relationships with Colleagues

A common belief is observed among the service workers that working in the retail and service industry offers one a platform for meeting and interacting with people of different social backgrounds, which they see as an advantage in their jobs. Thus, an attempt was made to look into interpersonal relations between co-workers, particularly to understand whether the opportunity for increased interactions between migrant workers from the North-East and those coming from other regions of the country results in better intercultural interactions and friendships.

All of the interview participants who are from the North-East opine that they have experienced better intercultural relations in their workplaces, in comparison to their experiences outside the workplace as in their residential localities or in other public places.

Better interactive experiences, here, implies a sense of being respected and treated as equal, and being judged not on the basis of ethnicity but their professional skills. It is, however, found that very few of these interactions or friendships between the co-workers go beyond the realm of the workplace, which means that inter-cultural friendships tend to be confined to the workplace only, whereas outside the workplace migrants from the North East tend to rely on their fellow Northerners only.

Language plays an important role in workplace relations and friendships. It is seen that those who are better at speaking in Hindi have shown a very high sense of motivation towards their job and also in terms of confidence regarding their future career aspirations, besides offering more positive feedback about their relationship with people from other cultures. On the other hand, those who are unable to speak Hindi, have expressed lower motivations for the present job and towards building and maintaining friendship with non-northeastern co-workers. This finding demonstrates the significance of workplace interpersonal relationships in determining the level of motivation in a worker for the job.

The relation between language and interactions may seem quite obvious and understandable if one sees it in terms of the functional role of a language in enabling communication and forming relationships. However, when we see this in terms of the politics of cultural hegemony where the Hindi language occupies a quintessential space in the national imagination and the national capital state of Delhi, it would enable one to understand that this distance in interpersonal communications and relationship is not merely a horizontal one, but, in some ways, vertical too. Therefore, the Hindi language, here, plays an important role as a cultural capital that helps the migrant workers in building their social and economic capitals.

An attempt was made to understand whether the migrants experience any kind of discrimination in their workplaces on the basis of their ethnicity. Perceptions regarding ethnic biases and discriminations at workplace varied individually. A few of the participants strongly feel that their workplace managers or supervisors treat them unfairly in terms of giving promotions or performance rewards or that their co-workers are not very friendly

with them which makes them feel isolated. On the other hand, a majority of the participants believe that only job performance matters at the workplace and that every worker, regardless of their cultural identity, is judged on the basis of how well she/he can interact with customers, “make the customers happy” and sell more products. A 38 years old participant, Henry, who has worked in the retail sector for more than ten years and worked as a store Manager in a high-end cosmetics brand before quitting the job to start his own business which he currently runs with the help of his wife, states “...you need to keep up with the competition, do something that nobody is doing to get highlighted. Being from the North-East we are not as smart as some of these guys from Delhi, so for promotions, we have to push ourselves harder”. Henry’s comparison of workers from the North-East and workers who are supposedly from Delhi, demonstrates the presence of a sense of relative disadvantage among some of the workers from the North East. However, organisational norms of rewarding skill and performance based on neo-liberal logic of hardwork and performance output, motivates and compels the workers to negotiate their workplace experiences and perceptions with regard to their understanding of professionalism which places the pressure of continuously proving themselves, through work output, onto the workers while also giving them a sense of agency and control over rewards. This is perhaps one of the significant reasons why this sector has been able to attract a large number of lowly educated and semi-skilled migrants from the North Eastern states, as against other occupational sectors, regardless of a widespread belief that northeasterners are unfairly treated in the city.

Family and Marriage

Majority of the Northeastern workers in this study are unmarried and are living alone or with their cousins or friends, away from home and family. Engaging in a casual conversation with two restaurant workers (a 21 years old man from Manipur and a 24 years old woman from Nagaland) in Delhi’s Connaught Place, who were sitting outside their workplace for a tea break, the researcher inquired about how working in the retail and service industry impacts a worker’s personal life. In response to the question, both the workers looked at each other and jokingly said that they barely have time for a personal life. Upon further probing by the researcher,

the woman says “I have so many friends in Delhi but hardly meet them. Some of them are from my own hometown and they invite me for weekend house-parties or during festivals but I can't go because weekends and festivals are the busiest time for us”; the young man further adds, with a laugh, “no time for dating also. Unlike what is found in some of the other studies on migrants from the North-East, where, their strong connections with friends and kin in the city and active involvement in ethnic associations are elaborately discussed, this study finds that for those working in hospitality and retail opportunity to socialise with fellow migrants and friends comes on rare occasions between their odd working schedule, which could also be one of the reasons why very few of them express a desire to settle down in the city or plan a long-term stay (this shall be discussed in the following sections).

Women participants in this study, particularly the Northeasterners, reveal a desire to return to their hometowns for marriage after working a few more years in the city. Of the three ‘currently married’ women participants from the North-East, all of them stated that their husbands also work in Delhi in the same industry which has made it possible for them to continue working even after marriage. However, none of them have children and are prepared to leave their jobs when they start their family planning. Premila, who is raising her daughter as a single mother since her divorce, is managing her career in Delhi by leaving her 10 years old daughter in Manipur under the care of her grandparents. This clearly shows that for the migrant women working in this industry, the choice between job and marriage do not go hand in hand. The absence of family and elders in the city to look after young children while the parents work, makes parenting a difficult choice for the migrants. This challenge is further aggravated by the high cost of living characteristic of city life and the relatively low salary in retail jobs. These issues make a return to the homeland an ultimate option for the women as well as men.

Future Career Aspirations

With the purpose of making an assessment of the future aspirations of the workers, participants were asked about their future career plans and in response they had to select their answer from a range of options like ‘(i) Stay in Delhi and work in the same industry’, ‘(ii)

Stay in Delhi or any other city and work in a different field’, ‘(iii) Return to homeland and do any job’, ‘(iv) Return to homeland and start a business’, ‘(v) Work abroad’, ‘(vi) Not decided’, ‘(vii) Others...’.

In response to this question, it is seen that ‘Not decided’ is the most common answer for the Northeastern women, Northeastern men are divided between the first two options. The interview, however, contained a combination of objective and subjective items. In the investigation of future aspirations of workers it is seen that participants responded slightly differently when the above stated objective question was followed by a subjective and unstructured discussion about long term career plans and scopes for older workers in the retail and service industry. In the detailed versions of their responses, Northeastern workers reveal a long term plan of returning to the homeland after working in Delhi or another city for a few more years. Only five participants from the Northeast (three women and two men), four of whom share an aspiration for working abroad and one owns her own restaurant business in Humayunpur and is married to a man from a different state, have not shown any interest towards returning home. Therefore, towards the end of the interviews most of the participants talk about ‘going back home’ and wanting to either start a business of their own or finding ‘any other job’. This pattern of the responses illustrates the uncertainty and lack of clarity in career planning and shows that this particular segment of migrant workers are largely living in the city and working without any certainty regarding their career or period of stay.

Participants, in this study, were asked if they knew anyone who had returned back to their hometowns after having worked in the retail industry in the cities, and if so, what are their current occupation. The responses raise concern as all the participants claimed to be knowing at least one returned migrant who is not engaged in any formal employment. It is found that due to the lockdowns in 2020 in response to the spread of Covid19 pandemic, several workers in this sector either lost their jobs or, as in the case of migrants, many left their jobs and the city to return home to their families. This is evident in some of the interviews where store managers as well as the other staff claimed that they had more people from the North-East working with them before the pandemic. Many migrant workers who had left for home during the first wave of Covid19, have

returned to rejoin their existing jobs or to find new ones. However, there is a significant lot who have stayed back in their hometowns, either unemployed or underemployed. While there is no available data on this regard to assess the exact situation in numbers, information shared by the participants indicate the seriousness of the matter which would be an important subject for future studies. Following is the anecdote of a return migrant (31 years old man from Manipur) who returned home from Delhi during a peak phase of Covid19 pandemic and have been living there since, in a situation of underemployment:

Both my younger brother and I lived there (in Delhi) before the pandemic. I was in a restaurant (working as a waiter) and he was working in a mall. When the lockdown happened we both had to struggle to pay house rent and other expenses from our savings so we decided to come back home when the trains started. After returning we started to help our parents in cultivation work, but a few months ago my brother went back to Delhi and now he is working in a mall in Gurgaon. I decided to continue staying here to help my parents since our father's health is not so good now as he is getting older, so at least one of us has to stay with them....It is difficult for me and I liked my job in Delhi better. When we both brothers were working and living together we were also able to save more money and send for our parents and younger sister but now it is not so easy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It can be seen that by working in the retail and service industry, through a performance of aesthetic labour, indigenous subjectivities are socialised into a western and class-coded pattern of behaviour which furthers the migrants' aspiration for social mobility and for an entrepreneurial experience. Day-to-day engagement with customers and sales and an understanding about businesses which is gained through the jobs is highly regarded by the workers who proudly assert that they have 'learned many things' from the job. These experiences tend to have a significant influence in the aspiration for starting a business of their own after returning to the hometown, and clearly, a lack of desire to engage in the conventional forms of

occupations characteristic of their native places, which seem to be a mismatch for their newly acquired self-identity and aspirations.

The neo-liberal ethic of hard work and self-motivation for success, while providing a justification to the workers for the difficulties they face in the workplaces, makes them unquestioningly accept their experiences of mental/emotional and physical stress caused by the job. Thus, despite having confessed about experiencing high levels of physical stress caused by long hours of standing, tiredness and lack of sleep and insecurities about the future of their livelihoods, the participants insist on being moderately to highly satisfied with their jobs. This also demonstrates how job expectations and aspirations tend to be influenced by an individual's social identity and social context. In this case, coming from a rural or semi-urban, lower or lower-middle class family background, the workers do not have any high expectations or aspirations for a job and therefore tend to be easily satisfied by the financial rewards and glamour of their aesthetic workplaces. This has been found to be truer for the women in this study. However, the question that arises here is how long this sense of contentment does last and how far, and for how long, is it able to fulfil their economic needs?

In the initial phase of the study, where most of the participants expressed a desire to return to their hometowns after working a few more years in the city, it was seen that the same participants had a very low to medium levels of bonding with their colleagues, therefore a need was felt to test whether there exists a relationship between workplace relationships and level of interest to continue in their job. However, in the later interviews, it was found that even those participants who claimed to be having some 'very good' friends among their colleagues, and also expressed a high level of motivation towards their current job, these participants too expressed a desire to return to their hometowns after some more years of stay in the city .

The idea of 'returning home' is not a problem in itself ,but it comes to raise concerns when perceived in terms of the context of return for the migrants who spend the most youthful years of their lives in the service industry and then come back to their hometowns with little savings of money, to a place where a problem of unemployment already looms large .To make matters more difficult ,the newly

developed urban and up-scaled subjectivities of these returned migrants then arrive at a stage where their urbanised aspirations and contextual realities are at a state of contradiction with each other, thus causing a new challenge of settling down with a means of livelihood that does not match their aspirations. Therefore the vulnerability of the migrants in terms of livelihood stretches to later ages of their lives, often with an added dilemma of negotiating between their urbanised self-identity and aspirations, and local opportunity structures in the North-East.

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