

# *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*

## *Race, Refuge and Retail*

DUNCAN MCDUIE-RA



AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

## **Northeast Migrants in Delhi**



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**Duncan McDuire-Ra**

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## MONOGRAPHS 9

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Map 1.1 India: States and Union Territories



## 1 Introduction

On a January evening in Humayanpur, a neighbourhood in south Delhi, three young men from Nagaland in baggy jeans, coloured sneakers and spiky hair – one with dyed highlights – inspect vegetables from a mobile vendor in the narrow alleyway outside the entrance to their stairwell. From a window five floors up, another Naga calls out for them to hurry up because he has already started cooking. The vegetable vendor begins negotiations in English, touting the quality of his eggplants. One of the Nagas starts speaking to the vendor in Hindi, telling him not to bother trying to overcharge them. They live upstairs and will be buying vegetables every day. The vendor chuckles, and jokes that he has never heard such bad Hindi but is happy to know he has new customers. The next morning a dozen young men and women wait at the main gate of the same neighbourhood in the Delhi fog. The men wear the jeans and sneaker combination while the women wear ensembles of leggings, cardigans, and skirts. They chat to each other in Mizo, Nagamese, and English while waiting to be picked up by a minibus that will drive them to their shift at a call centre in a corporate park in the satellite city of Gurgaon. Later that day in the brand new shopping mall in nearby Vasant Kunj, a trio of women from Manipur serve chicken burgers and fries in an Americana-styled restaurant. Dressed in a uniform of a black polo shirt and black pants with their hair tied up and generous applications of eyeliner, they move around the tables with oversized menus and answer frequent questions about the content of the meals. One of the customers, a foreign tourist, speculates with her companion as to whether they are migrant workers from China.

All over Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai, similar scenes are being played out with increasing regularity. Contemporary Indian metropolises are experiencing a rapid increase in migration from frontier areas, including large numbers of migrants from the Northeast region. This is significant given that migration involves engagement with the people and places of the Indian heartland, which clashes with the anti-India underpinnings of social and political life in the Northeast.

This book is an ethnographic study of migrants from the Northeast frontier of India to one of these cities, Delhi. Attention to migrants from the Northeast to Delhi offers insights into three interlinked

processes taking place in contemporary India. First, migration provides insights into the changes taking place in the Northeast itself. These changes are profound but rarely visible, as academic and policy research on the Northeast remains fixated on separatist insurgency and outdated inquiries into the compatibility of ethnic minority societies with modernity and/or the modern Indian state. Focusing on migrants leaving the region helps to re-situate research on the Northeast and reveal some of the dynamics of change taking place. While many migrants leave the region to escape conflict, many more leave to find work, to pursue education, and to fulfil changing aspirations. Engaging with India reveals shifts in the way the Indian heartland is perceived among communities in the Northeast. The mistrust of the past and present lingers but is assuaged by a mixture of necessity and opportunity. Second, migration from the Northeast reveals the ways in which Indian cities are changing. The liberalisation of the Indian economy over the past two decades and the (partial) embrace of consumerism among the burgeoning middle classes have created new spaces for consumption and investment, often critiqued for creating an exclusionary city. Yet Northeast migrants covert the employment opportunities in these spaces and employers in these spaces desire Northeast labour, particularly in shopping malls and call centres. Third, the stories and experiences of Northeast migrants give insights into what it means to belong to distinct ethnic minority communities in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. The experiences of Northeast migrants invite one to consider the ways in which tribal and other ethnic minority communities perceive their own identity, 'Indian' identity and society, and the degree to which they feel like they belong and don't belong to India. The spaces, places, networks, and politics of Northeast life in Delhi demonstrate a complexity to contemporary life that is worthy of detailed analysis and has implications for studying ethnic minorities throughout globalising Asia. Northeast migrants experience high levels of racism in Delhi, which in turn reveal a great deal about how race functions within India: crucial at a time when the majority of public debate and academic scholarship remains fixated on how Indians experience racism in other parts of the world. Migration places new strains on gender relations among Northeasterners, increasing tensions between men and women. Yet Northeasterners are far from passive victims in a hostile city. Northeast migrants engage in place-making practices by building neighbourhoods and religious communities. They protest the ways they are treated in the city and take the opportunity of being in the national capital to protest injustices back home. The 'Northeast map' of Delhi is a collage of urban spaces where migrants have established a presence in order to navigate, negotiate, and survive the city. In doing so, Northeasterners enact complex and multi-layered identities. Parochialism and ethnic tensions from the frontier travel to

Delhi, but a pan-Northeast solidarity that is virtually extinct back home characterises the migrant community in Delhi. At times the boundaries of this community extend to include migrants from across the Himalayas, mostly Ladakhis, Nepalis and Tibetans, and Burmese, especially members of ethnic minority groups sharing lineage and often faith with Northeast communities. Furthermore, there is a dramatic discord between the ways many Northerners see themselves (as largely cosmopolitan) and the ways they are perceived by the Indian mainstream (as largely backward). Enacting cosmopolitanism in Delhi challenges these stereotypes while affirming a sense of solidarity and difference among Northerners.

### **Looking for an everyday Northeast**

There are a number of incidents that, drawn together, explain how this research came about. I have been visiting Northeast India since 2003 and my research began at the local level in the state of Meghalaya. Northeast India refers to the area of land located on India's far eastern periphery. The Northeast is a quintessential borderland. The region shares over 90 per cent of its borders with other countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China, and Nepal. Barely connected by land to the rest of India, the Northeast is home to a diverse population ethnically distinct from the rest of India, 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 within other states (mostly within Assam). The region is populated by three main categories of people. First are 'Scheduled Tribes' which make up the majority of the population in four out of eight of the federal states in the region (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland). They also make up the majority of the population in different autonomous districts in the other states. Scheduled Tribes refer to communities listed under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. The Sixth Schedule provides safeguards for tribal lands, recognises traditional institutions of governance at the local level, and provides reservations in the bureaucracy and legislative assembly for members of Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled Tribes are also entitled to reservations outside the Northeast in national level institutions including colleges and universities. In a very general sense, Scheduled Tribes in Northeast India are hill-dwelling communities (often called 'hill tribes' in other parts of Asia) and speak Tibeto-Burman and Mon-Khmer languages. Many have strong ties to communities across international borders, particularly in Burma and China, and also farther afield in Southeast Asia.

Christianity is the dominant religion among tribals, with smaller communities of Buddhists and animists. I will refer to members of these communities as tribals throughout the book when there is a need to distinguish them from other Northeast communities. It is very important to point out that these communities are ethnically distinct from other Scheduled Tribes in India. I will discuss this difference further below but for the moment it is important to starkly differentiate between Northeast tribals as hill-dwelling communities with roots in Southeast Asia and central Indian *adivasis*, a set of communities possibly better described as indigenous, though this in itself opens up a raft of other debates best left to other studies (see Shah 2010).

The second are ethnic groups that share lineage with East and Southeast Asia but are not classified as tribals. These communities include valley-dwellers, principally the Ahom of Assam who trace their lineage to Tai-speaking peoples of Southeast Asia, and Meiteis of Manipur who speak a Tibeto-Burman tongue and trace their lineage to Yunnan in China and perhaps further east (Parratt and Parratt 1997, xii). The majority of the Ahom and Meitei communities practice Vaishnavite Hinduism, though with startling degrees of variation and incorporation of older faiths and rituals (Gogoi 2006; Parratt 1980). As members of fairly consolidated polities at the time of British expansion, neither groups were designated as 'backward tribes' and later as Scheduled Tribes. In the colonial era it was not simply ethnicity that determined whether a community was tribal but a conflation of British perceptions of political order, production methods, and degree of 'civilisation' (see Guha 1999; Robb 1997). Since the small Himalayan state of Sikkim became administered as part of the Northeast in 2002, this second group also includes the Sikkimese population, itself a complex mix of ethnicities including Bhutia (Tibetan), Nepali, and Lepcha under various different local reservation policies (Shniederman & Turin 2006).

The third are migrant communities from other parts of India and surrounding countries. In the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, waves of migrants have arrived through the expansion of the colonial economy, from the violence of the Partition in 1947, and from the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Migrants continue to be drawn by construction work, the expansion of the agrarian frontier, and the lucrative illicit trade across international borders. Thus in some parts of the region such as western Assam, Assamese speakers coexist with speakers of Bengali, Bihari, Nepali, and tribal languages like Boro, Garo, and Santhali. By contrast, in the Mizo hills a long armed struggle against the Indian state in the 1960s and 1970s led to the creation of the federal state of Mizoram in 1986. Bordered by Burma, Bangladesh, and parts of Assam, Mizoram has maintained strict entry controls for non-Mizos.

As a result the Mizos, a Tibeto-Burman people, dominate most areas of the economy, government, and police. Thus while internal diversity in Mizoram is limited, the distinctness of Mizo people from the rest of India is stark.

Academic and policy interest in the Northeast has remained preoccupied with ethnicity and/or conflict primarily explained through greed and grievance debates (Grossman 1991). Greed and grievance debates posit that armed conflicts are caused by either the desire for profits or are caused when 'grievances are sufficiently acute that people want to engage in violent protest' (Collier & Hoeffler 2004: 564). While the greed and grievance debates have proven fruitful for understanding the origins of insurgency in Northeast India (Bhaumik 2009; Cline 2006; Hazarika 1995; Nag 2002; Vadlamannati 2011), they are limited when applied to the social order that has emerged after almost 60 years of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Academic and policy literature on the Northeast is still dominated by attempts to explain the causes of violence rather than analysing the ways this violence is experienced, normalised, and contested. In the majority of the literature, the causes of violence are viewed as unchanging factors: poverty on the one hand and ethnic differences on the other (Hazarika 2004; Madhab 1999). While these are important factors, such analysis reveals very little about the enormous changes taking place in the region, particularly over the last 20 years.

Scholars and policymakers continually discuss the ways India has changed, but analysis of these dynamics is rarely extended to the Northeast region. The communities of the Northeast are viewed in much the same way as they were viewed at the time of Indian Independence in 1947. Scholars remain preoccupied with the incompatibility of ethnic-minority aspirations with the institutions of the modern nation-state, especially among tribal communities, obscuring an analysis of everyday life. Studying Northeast migrants in Delhi opens up scholarship on the region by focusing on those who leave it. More people are leaving the Northeast than ever before, and the heightened scale of migration is relatively new. This study asks what this tells us about the place they are from, the place they are going, and how migration challenges and affirms ethnic minority identities and belonging in contemporary India.

Since my first visit in 2003, I have returned to the Northeast several times a year. I have conducted fieldwork in different parts of the region for various research projects and have developed strong friendships throughout the Northeast, especially in the hill areas where my research has been based. It is through these friendships that the ideas behind this book gradually emerged. When I return to visit friends, enquiries after different family members are often met with replies like, 'Oh, she



is in Kolkata studying literature' or 'He has gone to Delhi for a hotel job' or 'She is in Bangalore in a call centre'. Sometimes such remarks are followed by admissions of anxiety about the welfare of said family member, but at other times it is followed by pride. One comment has stuck in my mind for a long time. When visiting a family I knew in the rural West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, they informed me that their son was now working in a hotel kitchen in Delhi. His mother beamed as she said proudly, 'He is just a boy from the hills and now he is serving food to foreigners in Delhi!' I can remember thinking that it must be odd being a Khasi, a Mon-Khmer tribal community, in one of the Indian cities. Who would you hang out with? Who would you talk to and in which language? What would people make of you? Where would you find *jadoh*<sup>1</sup> to eat? At first I didn't take much notice of these stories. I took them as examples of isolated paths that Northeasterners were taking to get through life. At the time I was far more interested in things that were happening in the frontier itself; the activities of the army, land disputes, hydropower projects, and anti-foreigner protests.

From 2007 I began to travel to Delhi more and more to attend conferences and workshops and to conduct research. I would spend long periods of time on university campuses where I would get a chance to talk to Northeast students about where they were from and what they were doing. During these trips I would meet with friends from the Northeast living in Delhi. On one occasion a friend asked me to meet her in Green Park, a suburb in south Delhi which – unbeknownst to me at the time – has a sizeable population from the Northeast. My friend and I met at a Southeast Asian themed restaurant staffed almost entirely by Northeasterners. I asked a few of them where they were from, and two were from Manipur and one from Nagaland. The young Naga waitress remarked that there were several other Nagas working in the kitchen. Over dinner my friend discussed her life in Delhi. She couldn't wait to leave. She was tired of her boss and his sexist comments, she was tired of not being able to move around the city without having to endure harassment and unscrupulous auto rickshaw drivers, and she was tired of being away from home. As we were leaving she commented that at least she had a decent job (she worked in an NGO at the time) and didn't have to work in a restaurant where the pay was scarcely enough to survive Delhi. I must have looked very confused. I paused to think. Delhi is over two thousand kilometres from the Northeast. Among Northeasterners I knew in the frontier it has a reputation for violence, racism, discrimination, and sexism. Delhi was in the heart of north India, seen by many Northeasterners as the antithesis of their social world (or how they imagined their social world):

1 A Khasi dish made from rice cooked in pork lard.

predatory and caste-ridden as opposed to collective and egalitarian. Besides, it was the capital of India, a state that granted citizenship to Northeasterners but that was also viewed variously as an illegitimate occupier, resource extractor, and/or source of corrupt and dysfunctional governance. My friend asked me what was wrong. Out came the question at the heart of this book: 'Then what are all these Northeasterners *doing* here?', I asked.

The final episode occurred in Assam in late 2010. Along with some other researchers originally from the Northeast, I was involved in organising a two-day seminar to take our research to the region and invite the public to listen and comment and also try to encourage scholars in the region to share their research. We had invited a number of scholars from the Northeast. Almost everyone we invited was based in heartland cities: Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai. It was quickly apparent how dispersed the Northeast population has become. During one of the lunch breaks I was talking to a fellow academic and friend from Manipur. I commented that the critical mass of Northeast scholars had now shifted to other parts of India. A resident of Delhi for ten years, he told me that it wasn't just scholars but also ordinary people from the Northeast – workers, students, city people, rural people. He started telling me about the neighbourhood where he lived in Delhi, where a Hmar from Manipur cooked *roti* in a Punjabi *dhaba*, where two young women from Nagaland sold clothes they had sent from the Burma border markets from an illegal shop in their apartment, and where an Afghani butcher peddled beef to Khasis and Mizos late at night in a designated alleyway next to the Karbi church housed in a one-room shop front. I responded with question after question. Why do they go? What do they do? Where do they live? What is it like? Even his infinite patience was wearing thin after a while. 'Come to Delhi when you get a chance,' he said, 'I will show you.' A little over a month later I was there and started fieldwork that felt as if it had been eight years in the making.

Once attuned to the phenomenon, I became quickly obsessed with the topic of Northeast migration. As someone who had studied identity politics, the environment, gender, rights and the law *in* the Northeast, the idea of following those who had left the region for a few months quickly opened up new angles. For me, Northeast migration converged with two issues I had started to follow in my research. The first emerged from research into pro-development, specifically pro-dam groups, representing ethnic minorities in the state of Sikkim (Deo & McDuie-Ra 2011; McDuie-Ra 2011). Pro-dam groups among the Lepcha minority posed complex dilemmas for environmentalists and anti-dam activists seeking to equate ethnic minority status, especially a small and 'vulnerable' minority, to a deeper ecological sensibility and anti-development ontology. Research into pro-dam Lepcha groups, while uncomfortable to

my own sensibilities, fragmented the homogenised view of ethnic minorities and highlighted the existence of differentiated political positions and agency among a numerically small tribal population. What stuck with me from this research was my growing fascination with ethnic minority communities behaving in ways no one expected of them. By this I include both the expectations of hegemonic communities who patronise and discriminate against ethnic minority communities *and* the expectations of the advocates and supporters of minorities who cast them in largely homogenous and often romantic ways.

Northeast migrants also behave in ways that no one expects. According to common portrayals, Northeasterners – and tribals in particular – are meant to be fighting for their land, opposing mines, and in the case of the Northeast, engaging in armed struggles against India. When they are not doing these things, they are supposed to be dancing in traditional outfits, weaving colourful shawls, and curing sicknesses with forest produce. These portrayals are reproduced through numerous outlets, from museums to government policy documents, from tourism advertising to environmental campaigns, and even among activists and ethno-nationalist groups from these communities (see chapter 4). Few expect, or indeed show much interest in, Northeasterners who are working as shop assistants in global chain stores, singing in karaoke lounges, or trading Korean movie DVDs. Migrants from the Northeast complicate the common view of frontier ethnic minorities as homogenous wholes, or as Xiaolin Guo terms it, the ‘unified front’ view of ethnic minorities (2009: 314).

The second issue had come up during research into extraordinary laws in the Northeast (McDuie-Ra 2009a, 2012a). I had been writing about the frontier culture of violence and had begun to explore, albeit briefly, the psychological impact of militarism on everyday life in the frontier. I became very interested in the ways ‘routine violence’, to use Gyan Pandey’s term (2006), had become woven into the fabric of everyday life in the Northeast and the ways this affected men and women in different ways. When I began to learn that migration was in part a way for young people to seek refuge from the frontier culture of violence, I saw a deeper link between frontier and city that needed much further investigation.

### **Finding a Starting Point**

It is perhaps telling that I began my fieldwork into Northeast migrants in Jorhat, a busy town in upper Assam established through the tea industry, some 2,200 kilometres from Delhi. Winters in the Northeast are a time when those living outside the region return home for

Christmas and New Year. I was fortunate enough to be staying with a number of scholars of the Northeast who had converged on Jorhat. Over several days I sought counsel on how best to undertake this project. My initial plan was to conduct ethnographic research in four cities: Bangalore, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Kolkata to get a comprehensive picture of Northeast migrants in all the cities where they live in significant numbers. Thankfully I was dissuaded from this undertaking and chose instead to focus on Delhi. All four cities are immense in terms of size and population and thus choosing one city would allow me to live there and get a much richer sense of the migrant community in one location.

I chose Delhi for a number of reasons. First, it has the largest community of Northeast migrants. The difficulties of obtaining reliable data on Northeast migrants are discussed in chapter 2, but irrespective of this Delhi is generally agreed to have the highest number of migrants. Second, the Northeast community in Delhi is more diverse. As discussed at length in chapter 2, Northeast migrants in Delhi are there to work, study, and do both. The other cities are usually known as destinations for work (Bangalore, Hyderabad) or study (Kolkata), but not both. Third, Delhi is an intriguing destination for Northeasterners. It is known as an unpleasant city in the Northeast. It is seen as unfriendly, expensive, and violent. This makes migration to the city so interesting. Furthermore, the symbolism of migration to Delhi is captivating. Delhi is the capital of India, and many ethnic groups in the Northeast predicate their identity on rejecting India. Six decades of insurgency and counterinsurgency in the Northeast has created a sense of living in an occupied territory. Anger at state neglect of development in the region underpins many of the grievances that have led to armed conflict. Successive Indian governments have responded through increased militarisation, the maintenance of extraordinary laws, and a paternalistic approach to the region's development and governance. Delhi is the site where these policies are formulated. From the point of view of the frontier, it is the central node where the occupation of the Northeast is conceived, executed, and justified. What does migrating from the frontier to the capital mean for Northeasterners? What does it mean for their families and peers? Does it debunk the oft-repeated grievances against India? Focussing on Delhi provokes questions that go beyond the material aspects of migration and draws upon questions of identity, citizenship, and nationalism.

As word travelled among friends that I would be researching Northeast migrants, I was put in touch with their relatives living in different parts of Delhi. Through these contacts I was eventually able to secure a place to stay in Humayanpur, one of the larger Northeast neighbourhoods in south Delhi. Humayanpur became an integral site for my fieldwork as I experienced daily life through its inhabitants. My

contacts in Humayanpur introduced me to friends and neighbours and they took me into their lives. We cooked and ate together, washed our clothes together, and travelled around the city to where they worked and studied. They in turn introduced me to other migrants they knew in other parts of the city. I was usually introduced as a friend 'studying Northeast people in Delhi' or 'tribals in Delhi', and this was usually met with enthusiasm among new acquaintances who would take me to places they thought would interest me: parties, churches, shopping malls, student meetings, neighbourhoods. After a while I had my own bearings and was able to navigate the migrant 'map' of Delhi myself. If I was ever at a loose end, I could go to different places – alleyways, parks, restaurants, shops – and find people I knew. I would wait and soon meet someone who I recognised or, more often than not, someone who recognised me – a foreigner they had seen around the Northeast places or had heard about from their friends.

I also travelled to parts of Delhi where Northeast migrants were working. I spent a great deal of time visiting shopping malls. For most of the time I concentrated on three interlinked malls in Vasant Kunj, a suburb in south Delhi: the Ambience Mall, the DLF Promenade, and the DLF Emporio, marketed as Delhi's 'most exclusive' malls with almost 300 stores between them. In these malls there were Northeast migrants working in large numbers. I was able to meet migrants while they were at work and often we made arrangements to meet outside work. This extended the neighbourhoods I visited and expanded my contacts in the city. I also spent a long time in these malls observing the rhythms of Northeast labour and their interactions with customers and supervisors. No one seemed to mind me – a foreigner – loitering in the malls for hours on end. Call centres were more difficult to visit as a non-employee. Friends offered to take me to where they worked but I was wary of getting respondents in trouble. I was able to visit the corporate parks where the offices are located and observe the beginning and end of the shifts as workers pile into mini-buses dropping them to different parts of the city.

Researching in this way forced me to adapt my research methods. In Delhi I tried arranging formal interviews but this did not go very well. Northeast migrants were often confused and also bemused when I tried to interview them formally. Often they would feel they didn't have anything important to say or that what they would say wouldn't be sufficient enough for an academic study. I realised that some of their hesitation came at least in part because their friends or relatives introduced me into their life. In this way I was accepted as a friend. Asking friends to consent to hour-long interviews, especially when we saw each other every day for several months in some cases, was simply strange. As fieldwork

went on, I had to be content with conversations rather than interviews. Conversations were invariably rich, insightful, and often very humorous.

**Image 1.1** *Northeast Neighbourhood. Humayanpur, Delhi*



During my fieldwork I had conversations with Northeast migrants every day for almost three months. I also returned for a follow-up visit in December 2011. Some of these conversations were brief. On a university campus I would meet a Northeast migrant and ask where they were from, what they were up to in Delhi, and how they found it. That would take a few minutes and we might never meet again. Other migrants I saw almost every day. If they lived in my neighbourhood we would talk while passing in the street, while cooking, or when I went to their flat in the evenings. There were all manners of interactions in between these extremes. There were people I met three or four times and with whom I had very unstructured conversations. There were others I met once but spoke for an hour around very specific topics. As the research progressed, there were certain people I really wanted to speak to – church leaders, student activists, and migrant community leaders. Aside from these specific respondents, everyone I met during my fieldwork – whether by intent or accident – contributed to the research in some way with a comment, an anecdote, or an action.

In conducting fieldwork I benefitted from my race and nationality. While this can be a disadvantage in many other South Asian contexts, in the case of research with Northeast migrants it worked to my advantage. As an Australian, I was seen as a distant outsider, removed from the tensions between Northeastern people and Indians, enabling respondents to speak openly and frankly to me about their experiences with India and Indians. Furthermore, I was not associated with any particular ethnic or tribal group from the Northeast, and this was an advantage when discussing intra-migrant issues and ethnic tensions from home. However, escaping such associations occasionally depended on how I came to meet particular respondents or how I was introduced. Some respondents were more forthcoming when around members of their own ethnic group and more cautious around acquaintances from other groups, especially in cases of already existing tensions. During fieldwork in 2011, this played out from time to time between Naga and Meitei respondents. Respondents from one group often wanted to air grievances about the other and would ask me to meet them another time if they felt they were unable to speak freely. This happened only a few times during my research. More often than not I benefitted by knowing a relative of a respondent back home, or their flatmate, or having visited their hometown. Respondents would often express surprise to meet a foreigner who knew of their home place, and this helped friendships form quickly.

My gender played an interesting role in the research. Gendered norms vary significantly between what I refer to as the Indian mainstream and among Northeasterners. This is discussed at length in chapter 5. The crucial point to note is that as a Western male it may have

been strange for me to meet with an Indian woman on her own in public, and very strange to meet with her alone in private, but for most Northeastern communities this is not strange at all. I often met with female respondents one to one in public and where they lived. Often we would go out to eat or wander around shops and markets. This did not mean, however, that other people didn't find it strange or scandalous; often people would stare at us, sometimes passing crude comments in Hindi and sometimes in English. It was not only men who indulged in this. Once I was sitting in a café with a female friend from Manipur and a table of young women sitting near us began to pontificate over whether my friend was a sex-worker. The stereotype of the loose and immoral tribal women loomed over many of these encounters and will be discussed throughout the rest of the book.

Race and gender intersected in different ways for many Northeasterners, especially from tribal communities. Spending time one on one with women was a non-issue because I was a foreigner and not an Indian, the latter suspected of having primarily dishonest intentions. Had I been conducting research in Southeast Asia, especially in locations where Western men are the ones identified as having dishonest intentions, the situation would likely have been very different. I also spent a great deal of time with tribal men. We spent more time hanging out on the street and in parks, though most often we spent time inside flats, playing cards, or listening to music. It was difficult to determine whether men and women spoke more or less openly with me when we were in mixed gender groups. The presence of men in a flat or in a group sitting at a restaurant did not result in women respondents falling silent or obviously altering their answers, though no doubt this happened. In fact, the reverse seemed more common. Men would be a little less forthcoming when their female friends were around, especially on topics like relationships and employment. As can be expected when respondents were among friends with whom they were comfortable, they talked more openly – this was not obviously determined by gender but did seem to rest on ethnicity.

Audio recordings made people uncomfortable and I soon jettisoned it in favour of a notepad. Respondents were generally good-humoured when I would stop them and write something down, even when I asked them to repeat it. With migrants I met regularly, this became a bit of a joke. Someone would pause mid-sentence and say, 'You should write this down', after which they might pause theatrically and say something banal like 'I am going to cook rice now.'

I have used the general term 'respondent' throughout to refer to subjects of this research. I have changed all the names of respondents in this book in keeping with standard ethical practice. Many Northeast names are complicated. Names are particular to different ethnic groups



and often to smaller clan and tribal groups within. Thus in selecting pseudonyms, it is important to select an appropriate one matching the ethnicity of the respondent. Any mistakes made in doing this are wholly mine. Furthermore, it is common for many Northeasterners, especially tribals, to have Western names as a product of Christian conversions. In these cases I have used Western pseudonyms. Some respondents were known by their nicknames, often shortened versions of their first or family name. Others were known by their last names, often the name of their tribe. In selecting pseudonyms for respondents, I have remained faithful to their preferences.

In adopting a standard ethnographical approach using participant observation and interviews/conversations, I make no claims to absolute objectivity. In fact I am clearly telling this story from the perspective of Northeast migrants. I have not interviewed those who employ Northeast migrants, landlords who rent to them, academics/teachers who teach them, their classmates, city authorities, or the police. This is deliberate. Northeast voices are seldom heard outside the frontier, and telling the migration story from the perspective of Northeast migrants – in so much as this is possible as an outsider – gives precedence to the ways they see their own encounters with the city and mainstream Indian society. Gaining insights into how the mainstream population in India views Northeast people is not difficult to gauge from other sources, and chapter 3 discusses this in both the national context and specifically in Delhi. As such I am a kind of ‘engaged observer’ (Sanford 2006), though my aim is to direct a critical lens in all directions rather than typecast a vaudeville scenario of valiant Northeast victims on one side and a devious conglomerate villain made of non-tribal urban dwellers, the Indian state, the Delhi government, and the authorities on the other. In my previous work in the region I have endeavoured to avoid this kind of trap, and I continue to do so here.

In framing the ethnographic material, I deploy a number of useful concepts where necessary in the relevant chapters but avoid the temptation to mute the rich experiences of Northeast migrants by relating them to the latest trends in academic thinking. While certainly a proven method for temporary popularity, when fascination with such trends subsides the material faces abandonment as readers move on to the next bright spark. In addition, such framing often leads to diverse and interesting empirical material being framed in predictable ways, leaving the intricacies of context in the background, especially the contradictory or messy elements.

## Terminology

Finding an accurate collective term for Northeast migrants is difficult. Initially I used the term 'tribal migrants' because tribal is the commonly used word by the communities designated as such in the Indian Constitution, and used by the state and central governments in India to describe the same communities. This term is also useful as it enables a separation to be made between tribals from the Northeast and non-tribal 'Indians'. This is attractive in explaining racism and discrimination experienced by Northeast migrants in Delhi, which draws upon distinct differences in physical appearance. However, the term poses a number of problems. First, not all people in the Northeast are tribals. The general and much abused rule in the Northeast is that tribals live in the hills and other communities in the valleys. This holds in many parts of the region but it is not only people from the hills who migrate to Delhi or who face racism and discrimination based on their ethnicity. Tribal communities form the overwhelming majority of the population in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram. They are the majority communities in the hill districts of Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, although migrants from the hills also live in towns and cities in the valleys, and many have done so for generations. In other parts of these states, the scenario is more complicated.

In Assam, not all tribals live in hill areas. Furthermore, within the non-tribal category are Tai-Ahoms who are descendants of Tai-speaking migrants and considered to be the true 'sons of the soil' in Assam. The grievances of the Tai-Ahom community have been at the heart of the insurgency in Assam since the 1970s, much of it directed at unfettered migration into Assam from other parts of India and Bangladesh. Although they are distinct from the Indian mainstream, have pursued separatist politics, and trace their lineage to Southeast Asia (with a few centuries of acculturation in between), Tai-Ahoms are not considered tribals legally, nor would they self-identify as such. The adoption of Hinduism and a version of the caste system, historical animosity (and cooperation) between the hills and the valleys, and a civilisation core to ethno-nationalist discourse vis-à-vis uncivilised hill dwellers ensure that this separation continues.

In Manipur, the Meiteis of the Imphal valley are the majority population and also the decedents of an independent kingdom with strong ties to Ava and other polities in what is now Burma. The Meitei are a Tibeto-Burman people, like most tribes in the hills surrounding the valley. Their politics has been unequivocally anti-India and the state has been torn apart by separatism, though they too are not tribals legally nor do they identify themselves as such. A dichotomy between the civilised valley and the primitive hills also operates in Manipur. Tensions

between Meiteis and the tribal communities in the hills have led to violence in recent decades, though this exists alongside intermarriage between Meities and tribals and other instances of everyday cooperation and harmony. Nonetheless, many Meiteis would be very uncomfortable about being cast as tribals. This matters a great deal, as migrants from Manipur make up such a significant proportion of those leaving the Northeast and settling in Delhi. A term that excludes Meiteis cannot adequately describe the Northeast community in Delhi.

In Sikkim, the population consists of two scheduled communities, the Bhutia and the Lepcha, administered under the conglomerate Bhutia-Lepcha category, and the majority Nepali population. Sikkim is an interesting case because it is undergoing a process of tribal category creation, mostly led by the state government to facilitate patronage (Shniederman & Turin 2006). Thus among the Nepali population, ethnic groups with Tibeto-Burma lineage such as the Limbu, Rai, and Tamang are discovering their 'tribal roots' and celebrating them in return for reservations in employment and educational institutions, while the Lepcha community has been designated Most Primitive Tribe status since 2006 (McDuie-Ra 2011). The only communities left without tribal status in Sikkim are Nepalis from the upper castes, migrants from elsewhere, and recently arrived Tibetan migrants (as opposed to older Tibetan migrants). In the Darjeeling Hills, the territory immediately south of Sikkim and not included as part of the Northeast, a movement for an independent Gorkhaland state has revived in the last decade. Part of the demands includes giving Scheduled Tribe status to communities living in these hills, most of whom are from the same ethnic groups as in Sikkim.

The challenge I face in this research is where to draw the boundaries of the category I use to discuss migrants from the Northeast. Using 'tribal migrants' excludes some migrants from Manipur, some from Sikkim, and some from Assam. In Delhi, migrants from these states are very much part of migrant communities and are subject to much of the same harassment, discrimination, and violence. Ignoring these communities makes no sense, especially Meiteis who make up such a large contingent of migrants. Furthermore, for scholars familiar with India but not so familiar with the Northeast, the term 'tribal' creates confusion with tribal communities from central India, often referred to as *adivasis*. *Adivasis* are not related to Northeast tribals ethnically nor have they had a great deal of historical contact, and they fall under a different constitutional provision (the Fifth Schedule). Most importantly, the term 'tribal' is often considered pejorative when referring to these communities, whereas for Northeast tribals the term is internalised and used in identity discourses as a source of pride, akin to being identified as indigenous and being able to make claims on ethnically defined

territory (Van Schendel 2011; Xaxa 1999). Despite this clear difference, the term evokes suspicions from those familiar with tribals in other parts of India, and this is a confusion I am loath to perpetuate if it can be avoided.

The second option, and the one I have chosen, is to just use 'Northeast migrants' and 'Northeasterners' instead. The problem with this is that the Northeast just refers to a chunk of land. It is a recently created administrative territory that has limited meaning and significance to its inhabitants. Northeast denotes an area to the north and the east of the Indian heartland, firmly placing it within the cartographic bounds of the modern Indian nation-state; an inclusion that many communities in the Northeast have struggled against. There is a further problem in that while tribal may have been a limiting term, the term Northeast is not limited enough. It is a geographic rather than an ethnic term. There are people born in the Northeast whose parents or grandparents came to the region from Bihar, or Rajasthan, or Bengal to trade, farm, and serve in the civil service or the armed forces. Yet when these people migrate to Delhi they blend in rather than stand out. Therefore in using the terms 'Northeast migrants' and 'Northeasterners', I am referring to those people from the Northeast who trace their lineage to East and Southeast Asia and as such are members of ethnic minorities racially distinct from communities in the rest of India, even when accounting for the diversity of India's population. As I will argue frequently, there is a distance between the peoples of the Northeast frontier and the rest of India that is qualitatively different to other regional differences within the country. From time to time I discuss specific groups using the name of their tribe or ethnic group, Khasi or Mizo for instance. At other times I discuss the federal state where they originate, a migrant from Meghalaya for example. I usually refer to both ethnic and tribal groups when talking about identities and allegiances. This is simply because some groups in the Northeast describe themselves as tribes, usually when they fall under the Sixth Schedule, and other groups consider themselves ethnic groups (or nations). In some cases there is a hierarchy generated through decades of anthropological classification and ethno-nationalist politics. Thus an individual may belong to a tribe (Lotha) and an ethnicity (Naga). Add to this a sense of regional identity (Northeasterner) and citizenship (Indian), and it becomes clear why it is important to keep the specificities of identity as open as possible.

The terms 'Northeast migrants' and 'Northeasterners' are far from perfect. However, in the interests of being inclusive to all the ethnic groups, it will have to suffice. The practical difficulties of discussing 'tribals, Ahoms, Meiteis, and non-scheduled Sikkimese' throughout the book can no doubt be appreciated. Further, as the only other collective

name for this group of people is the derogatory term ‘chinky’, a term used in racial abuse and not claimed by Northeasterners, there is no other satisfactory collective term. It is also interesting to note that despite my initial opposition to use the geographic term, other people in Delhi use the term ‘Northeast’ to describe migrants from the frontier.<sup>2</sup> Thus a homemade sign spotted in Munirka advertising positions for ‘150 telli-callers’ for work calling ‘UK and US’ requests applicants from ‘Nort-East Peopel’ [sic]. Small shops selling vegetables from the frontier advertise ‘Northeast Herbs’ on signs pasted to their entranceways. A restaurant in Humayanpur advertises ‘North-East Food’ and lists a menu of primarily Naga specialities. While the question ‘northeast of where?’ is important for critically deconstructing episodes of colonial and postcolonial state-making on the frontier, in Delhi the question ‘northeast of where’ is answered simply ‘northeast of here’; namely northeast of Delhi, of India. Finally, during this research it became clear that although a common Northeast identity is elusive in the frontier itself, among the different ethnic minority groups a nascent pan-Northeast identity exists among migrants, forged through shared experiences of life in an Indian city and a reconsideration of the ties that bind communities from the frontier. This is discussed in detail in chapter 6 and reiterates the point that although the idea of the Northeast may be deeply contested in the frontier, in Delhi it gives migrants from the region an identity that is inclusive but also distinct from the Indian mainstream.

Throughout the book I use ‘frontier’ to describe the Northeast and ‘heartland’ to describe the rest of India. Occasionally I use periphery instead of frontier when suitable. Frontier is an inherently colonial concept when applied to the Northeast. Indeed, the word frontier was used often in colonial laws, regulations, and geographical descriptions including the North East Frontier Agency, now Arunachal Pradesh, and the North East Frontier Railway, still in use today. The hills in particular were seen as a physical and civilisational frontier between the valley polities and the so-called ‘backward tracts’. A similar view is evident from the Burmese and Chinese side of these hill ranges (Giersch 2001; Sakhong 2003). I continue to use the term frontier, as it best surmises the way the Northeast and its inhabitants are viewed by the rest of India. Relegating frontier to a purely colonial context overlooks the way the frontier mentality has been reproduced in post-colonial India. Furthermore, ‘frontier’ suits the perspective of many communities in the Northeast who see themselves as external to the rest of India or on the edge, margins, or periphery of the Indian state. The concept of the frontier has become more common among Northeast migrants as a

2 I am grateful to Dr. Joy Pachuau for pointing this out to me.

self-conscious reference to the distance of home from the rest of India. 'We live way out on the frontier' is a common refrain uttered by a migrant to explain why she or he is mistaken for a Chinese by a classmate or why she or he attended boarding school in another state. Yet this is usually only when reference to home is being made from far away. At home, place is not usually considered as part of the frontier but the centre of social and political life. Viewing home as a part of the frontier only really happens when home is considered separate from the heartland.

In contrast, I refer to other parts of India as the heartlands. Heartlands are the antithesis of frontiers. While India has other frontiers aside from the Northeast, making the idea of a unified or even identifiable heartland problematic, the concept of a unitary 'India' that is 'out there' away from the Northeast is an important part of the local spatial imaginary. Thus, for Northeasterners, travelling to Delhi or Mumbai is referred to as 'going to India'. People who live in the heartlands and not in the frontier are considered Indians whether they are Punjabi, Tamil, or Goan. This is not to suggest that Northeasterners are incapable of differentiating between the different peoples of India – far from it. But from the viewpoint of the frontier, these communities fit into India in ways they themselves do not, and in many cases do not wish to. Heartlands suggest a typical landscape peopled by typical Indians. Of course no such landscape exists, nor do typical Indians, but for ethnic minorities on the very edge of the Indian national imaginary, there needs to be some way to conceive of 'the rest of India'. Thus I use heartland as the antithesis of frontier, acknowledging its severe limitations, but also I use the comparison to try to privilege the Northeast worldview and emphasise the ways they locate themselves in India.

I refer to the culture of the heartland as 'mainstream Indian society'. Again this is an empirically weak generalisation but one that is common among Northeast migrants. National media, national history, national public sphere, national symbolism, national sporting teams contribute to the idea of a mainstream India from which Northeast communities are either excluded or from which they exclude themselves. To cite a brief example, one evening I was with a friend from Manipur and we were buying beer from a rather seedy liquor store in Delhi. When I got to the front of the iron cage that separated customers from store attendants, I saw that they had two kinds of beer: Fosters, an Australian beer, and Kingfisher, an Indian beer. I turned to my friend and asked, 'Your country's beer or my country's beer?' He looked at me strangely and said, 'Manipur doesn't make bottled beer. And India is not my country. So let's have your beer.' I was very embarrassed. After so many years being involved with the Northeast, I should have known better. The point to note is that the dichotomy between heartland and

frontier, between mainstream society and different ethnic minority societies, is very real. There are varying degrees of ambiguity on the edges of this dichotomy, as will be seen throughout this book. And while the boundaries of where mainstream Indian society begins and ends are virtually impossible to define, I use Indian mainstream in much the same way as one might use 'white America' when discussing Hmongs in Minnesota, or 'Han China' when discussing Uyghurs in Beijing. The Indian mainstream is a fuzzy idea but something that Northeasterners *feel*. It is the hegemonic society that they don't belong to but that characterises the space they live in when they migrate to heartlands. Whatever the flaws of the generalisation, it is one that ethnic minorities from the frontier make to distance themselves from the mainstream and reproduce their minority identities. It is also worth briefly noting that during fieldwork I began to suspect that when Northeasterners referred to 'Indian society', 'Indian culture' and 'the mainstream', they were really referring to typified north Indian society, itself stereotyped and caricatured in their worldview. Often when discussing Indian society, respondents would add the caveat that what they were saying did not apply to south Indians, nor sometimes to Kashmiris.

### Structure of the book

This book contains six substantive chapters, including this introductory chapter, and a shorter concluding chapter. Chapter 2, *Leaving the Northeast*, identifies push factors behind the rapid increase in out-migration from the Northeast migration over the last decade, what I refer to as the migration moment. The chapter sets out six main factors spurring migration from the frontier: refuge, livelihoods, aspirations, attitudes towards India, labour recruitment, and connectivity.

Chapter 3, *Coming to Delhi*, examines the pull factors leading migrants to Delhi. Migrants choose Delhi for two main reasons. The first is the demand for Northeast labour. The desire for Northeast faces and bodies in the de-Indianised spaces of globalising Delhi is fuelling a rapid increase in migration. The second reason is that Delhi is seen as the best destination for higher and tertiary education. Delhi has India's best universities and colleges, all of which have reserved places for Northeasterners. Delhi is the site where the tools of the Indian state can be learned; tools that can be used to acquire the highly valued Indian Administrative Services (IAS) posts back in the Northeast.

The remaining chapters concentrate on the ways Northeasterners experience the city. Chapter 4, *Backward, Head-hunter, Sexy, Chinky*, is about racism. Northeasterners are judged first and foremost by their

appearance. Physical features denoting Tai, Tibeto-Burman, and Mon-Khmer lineages mark migrants as separate from the India mainstream, even when accounting for the diversity of that mainstream. I analyse racism through discussions of racial epithets and stereotypes, discrimination experienced by migrants, harassment and violence, and the different ways migrants respond to racism. The final section questions what this reveals about race within India. While the discourse on race has been dominated by the colonial experience and the experience of racism among the Indian diaspora, racism towards ethnic minorities in India is largely overlooked.

Chapter 5, *Provincial Men, Worldly Women*, is about gender. I concentrate on two phenomena: the divergent experiences of migration for Northeastern men and women and the unravelling of masculine norms among migrants. After a discussion of the ways gender is constructed in the frontier, I analyse what happens to notions of gender among migrants focussing specifically on men's desire to protect and police women from their ethnic group. I also explore the sense of guilt expressed by men who have left militarised environments for the (relative) safety of the faraway city, while in the final section I explore new gendered identities emerging among migrants.

Chapter 6, *Place-making in the City*, is about the tactics, practices, politics, and objects that are imperative to migrant life in Delhi. In contrast to the chapters on race and gender, I try to move beyond the notion of Northeasterners as victims of the city and instead focus on what migrants actually *do* in Delhi and how this helps them to create their own places in the city. I share what I refer to as the Northeastern map of Delhi: the collection of places where migrants live, pray, socialise, celebrate, and establish everyday patterns and rituals. After discussing politics and protest in Delhi as a place-making practice, I explore cosmopolitanism among migrants. Cosmopolitanism is an important part of ethnic identity in the frontier, especially in urban areas. Yet in Delhi, away from the frontier, cosmopolitanism takes on additional significance as a way of differentiating from the Indian mainstream and contesting archaic stereotypes. Respondents demonstrated a number of cosmopolitan influences in what they consume, what they reproduce, and what they relate to.

In the concluding chapter I explore three themes raised by this book. The first is what I refer to as the 'inward pull' of citizenship that complicates some of the analysis of frontier areas in the burgeoning field of borderlands studies. The case of migrants from the Northeast shows us the circumstances under which citizenship of a state, even if realised through hostile perceptions of the heartland, matters for frontier dwellers. The second is the experience of ethnic minorities in urban areas throughout Asia. Is the urban experience of ethnic minorities



particular? If so, will it always be different from the experiences of other urban migrants? As Asian cities continue to grow and frontier areas are becoming linked more closely, even if forcefully, to heartland cities, these questions become pertinent. Finally, the theme of alternative cosmopolitanisms has been discussed by a number of authors from various disciplines. The case of migrants from the Northeast shows the ways in which cosmopolitanism helps to differentiate between ethnic minorities and the mainstream rather than seeking commonality through universalism. It is the commonalities felt with peoples outside India that draw Northeasterners together and give them a more complex notion of who they are and who they are not.