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# Leaving the Militarized Frontier: Migration and Tribal Masculinity in Delhi

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## Abstract

In this article, the author examines the challenges to masculinity prompted by migration from the Northeast frontier of India to the capital city Delhi. Northeast India has been characterized by insurgency, counterinsurgency, and ethno-nationalism since Indian Independence in 1947. In this militarized environment, masculinity has been shaped by historical constructions of a warrior past fused with contemporary constructions based on ethno-nationalism and armed struggle. A dramatic increase in migration out of the region by young men and women to the urban centers of India to work in the retail and call center industries poses a major challenge as it ruptures the masculine norms of home. In response, men attempt to enforce these masculine norms with varied results. At the same time, new expressions of masculinity are evolving alongside conventional expressions demonstrating the fluidity of masculinity even among men from a region where masculine norms appear rigid.

## Keywords

masculinity, migration, Northeast India, militarization, tribals

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## Introduction

This article analyses the challenges to tribal masculinity after migration from the Northeast frontier of India to the capital city Delhi. The Northeast is India's far eastern frontier, a borderland only narrowly connected to the rest of India and characterized by insurgency, counterinsurgency, and ethno-nationalism since Indian Independence in 1947. In this militarized environment, masculinity has been shaped by historical constructions of a warrior past fused with contemporary constructions based on ethno-nationalism and armed struggle. In this article, the author examines what happens when men are removed from the militarized context where masculinity is constructed and reproduced. A dramatic increase in migration out of the region by young men and women to the urban centers of India poses a major challenge to tribal men as it ruptures the masculine norms of home. In response, tribal men attempt to enforce masculine norms of home with varied results. However, new expressions of masculinity are evolving among migrants and these coexist alongside more conventional expressions demonstrating the fluidity of masculinity even among men from a region where masculine norms appear rigid.

In this article, intersectionality is used a method of inquiry into the ways tribal masculinity is experienced, expressed, challenged, and altered through migration. Initially, scholars used intersectionality to examine the intersections of race, class, and gender, and generate a feminist praxis to challenge oppressive structures faced by ethnic minority women (Crenshaw 1991). In recent years, the concept has broadened to account for the intersection of "multiple axis of differentiation" (Brah and Phoenix 2004, 76), which can create "hierarchies of differential access to a variety of resources—economic, political and cultural" (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199). In this case, multiple axes include gender, ethnicity, militarization, labor, and migration, all of which exist in mutually constitutive yet dynamic relationships.

This article is the result of ethnographic field research conducted in Delhi during a three-month period from December 2010 to February 2011. It is also informed by eight years of ethnographic fieldwork in Northeast India. This article is part of a larger research project on contemporary tribal life in Northeast India and among migrants leaving the region and heading to other parts of India. In Delhi, the author lived in a Northeast enclave, traveled with tribal migrants around the city, and conducted semiformal interviews and conversations in the places where tribal migrants live, work, and study over an eight-week period. In this research, the author explored several interlinked aspects of life for tribal migrants including labor, gender relations, racism and discrimination, and changing notions of identity. Out of these aspects emerged a recurrent theme of ruptured and reinvented masculinity, which has become the focus of this article.

This article is divided into five sections: The first section introduces the region of Northeast India, the concept of tribe, and tribal masculinity. The second section discusses the "push" and "pull" factors leading to migration from the Northeast to

Delhi. The third section analyses the challenges to masculinity from migration concentrating on two: gender relations and purposelessness. The fourth section examines new expressions of masculinity evolving among tribal males in Delhi concentrating on two: subaltern masculinity and cosmopolitanism masculinity. The fifth section concludes the article by discussing the implications of this study and its relevance to other contexts.

## **Northeast India: Conflict, Gender, and Masculinity**

The Northeast refers to the region of India between Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal containing eight federal states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The region is almost completely cut off from the rest of India, joined only by a narrow corridor of land. The communities categorized as “tribals” trace their linguistic heritage to Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman peoples of Southeast Asia and Southwest China, suggesting that the Northeast has been a barrier between India and Southeast Asia (Cordaux, Shah, and Stoneking 2004). Tribals are the majority population in five of the eight of the federal states in the region<sup>1</sup> and large minority populations in the other three states. Christianity is the dominant religion among tribals with smaller communities of Buddhists and animists, while communities in the valleys practice Hinduism and Islam.

Masculinity in the tribal areas of Northeast India is influenced by two dominant social constructions, one historical and the other contemporary, though they converge. First are “traditional” male roles in tribal society: hunting, warfare, slaving taking, land brokering, and dispute resolution. This is popularized as a warrior past and this is reproduced in folklore, museums, tourism, and local histories (Kikon 2009; Patil 2011). In addition, the constitutional provisions of the sixth schedule have formalized indigenous institutions of governance normalizing the exclusion of women from decision-making bodies on the grounds of tradition, despite the fact that these institutions have taken on many of the roles of the modern state (Barbora 2008; McDuie-Ra 2007; Nongkynrih 2002). Traditional male roles have become institutionalized normalizing men as community decision makers and keeping male roles of the past at the forefront of contemporary society.

Second are contemporary male roles that have evolved through six decades of armed struggle. Armed struggle responded to forced integration into the Indian Union, uneven local political and economic autonomy, and the neglect of basic needs. In response, new states and territorial units were created by the Indian Government normalizing the notion of “ethnically exclusive homelands” (Baruah 2003). Groups without homelands sought new territorial units leading to local struggles between ethnic groups with the Indian state acting as arbitrator (Das 2009). Furthermore, the inability of successive Indian Governments and local governments to control migration into the region has furthered grievances and violence. As a result, conflicts exist between different ethnic and tribal groups (and the territorial

units representing them), between particular ethnic groups and the Indian state, and between communities indigenous to the region and migrants. Men are active in these conflicts and masculinity is expressed through allegiance to the ethno-nationalist cause and reproductions of a warrior past.

In this environment, men act as protectors of their community from “outsiders”: members of Indian armed forces and paramilitary, migrants from other parts of India and surrounding countries, and/or members of rival ethnic and tribal groups. This is enacted through involvement in armed violence, involvement in ethno-nationalist politics, vigilante activity (such as intimidating migrant laborers and shopkeepers), enforcing strikes and boycotts, and moral policing of women from the ethnic or tribal group. Tribal men are warriors and protectors in an ongoing multifaceted battle for territorial control and community survival.

This may give the impression of a society, or set of societies, in which women are marginalized by masculine hegemony. However, gender indicators for women in the region are among the best in India. Women in the Northeast are seen as more empowered, engaged in more egalitarian social and legal relations with men, and less constrained by the patriarchal forms of power that dominate the rest of India. In the tribal majority states, female literacy rates are among the highest in India (MHFW 2002, 53). Women in all Northeast states get married later than women elsewhere in India (MHFW 2002, 57). Employment rates for women are well above the national average in the tribal majority states, though the proportion of these women who are paid cash for their work is lower than the national average, suggesting much of this work is agricultural labor on family plots (MHFW 2009, 452). In all states in the Northeast except Tripura, the percentage of women participating in household decision making is far above the national average, and in Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland it is almost double the national average (MHFW 2009, 467). Beneath these indicators are strong patriarchal relations, though these are formed through different traditions to those in other parts of India and are commonly regarded, perhaps misleadingly, as evidence of a “softer” patriarchy.

Men and women exist in an environment dominated by the nationalist infused masculinity of the occupying military, the ethno-nationalist masculinity of insurgency and gun culture, and the obligatory masculinity of tribal men drawn from the performance of “traditional” roles. Attention to the impacts of violence in the Northeast has focused predominantly on women (Banerjee 2010; Bora 2010; McDuie-Ra 2012). The impacts on women have been horrific. Murder, rape, and torture by the armed forces and by militant groups impute a deep sense of fear and insecurity in everyday life. This shapes the choices women make about their own mobility and those of their family members, and the choices family members impose on women. There is far less attention to the ways that militarization affects men. Young men are racially profiled as insurgents by the military and are the targets of recruitment by insurgents. Movement, employment, education, and social networks are all jeopardized in this environment. Young men who move in groups

attract high levels of suspicion and harassment, yet young men who move around on their own are far more vulnerable to harassment. The psychological impact militarization has on young men is rarely examined beyond being a catalyst to join militant groups or the armed forces. Attention is mostly given to combatants, with little attention given to the impacts of militarization on noncombatants, particularly the long-term psychological impacts of living in this environment. Rehabilitation of former militants is almost entirely focused on vocational training and cash incentives, with no resources or consideration of psychological support (Farrelly 2009).

Not all men deal with this well. Narcotic use is very high in the Northeast and particularly high in the states close to the Myanmar border. As Kermodé et al. have shown, introduction to intravenous drug use is often framed as a rite of passage among young men in the region; proof of their masculinity (2009). As they argue, “young men engage in drug use in order to fill a social vacuum created by limited opportunities to meaningfully engage in adult roles within the community” (2009, 1085). Females are also drug users and this is linked to sex work and vulnerability to trafficking, though intravenous drug use is not as high (Kermodé et al. 2009). Alcohol use and abuse is widespread among men in the Northeast, so much so that three states have a ban on alcohol sale (Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland).<sup>2</sup> While attention is drawn to violence against women from the occupying armed forces, violence against women within tribal societies is very high. Elsewhere, the author has discussed the interplay between familial causes of violence and nonfamilial or “street” violence in the region and the flow on into the normalization of violence against women (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Migration removes men from this environment where their masculinity is produced, while women gain a sense of independence away from the constraints of home.

### *Migration to Delhi: Push and Pull Factors*

Academic study of migration out of the Northeast is scarce. Scholars focus on migration *into* the region seen as fuelling ethno-nationalist politics and insurgency (Bhaumik 2009; Hazarika 2000; Singh 1987) and internal displacement (Das 2008). Unlike other communities studied in South Asia, tribal migrants do not have a history of labor migration to the urban areas of mainland India. Tribal society has been based on territorial control in the face of colonization and state formation. Staying put has been instrumental in securing territory and making claims on the state for territorial autonomy. Yet, more tribals are leaving the Northeast than ever before and the profile of these migrants has shifted significantly.

As migration to Delhi is internal and as most migrants do not own property or businesses in Delhi their population is not accurately recorded. Recent survey data from the North East Support Centre and Helpline (NESCH) put the number of Northeast migrants in Delhi (tribal and nontribal) at approximately 200,000 people and this accounts for 48.21 percent of the total Northeast migrant population and the number of tribal migrants has increased by twelve times between 2005 and 2011

(NESCH 2011a, 10). The accuracy of the figures is questionable but for the time being it is the only figure to go on. From fieldwork it is apparent that most tribal migrants come to Delhi in their twenties and migrate without their parents, though increasingly they are coming with siblings. Both men and women migrate to Delhi in more or less equal proportion.

Tribal migration to Delhi has taken place since Indian Independence, yet given the distance between the Northeast and Delhi most tribal migrants moving to urban areas chose towns in their own tribal areas or within the region. Those traveling to Delhi were mostly traveling to learn the tools of the Indian bureaucracy and for tertiary education. With the top universities in the country and also the top preparatory courses for taking the Indian Administrative Services (civil service) exams, Delhi attracted the wealthy and educated from the Northeast. This group of migrants continues to come to Delhi but migrants from other class and income backgrounds now join them.

Why has migration increased so rapidly in the last half decade? First, people leave the region to escape the militarized environment of home. Those who can leave this environment do so, even if only for a year or two. Delhi is over 2,000 kms from the Northeast and relocating there requires planning and time. Migrants heading such a long distance are leaving the militarized environment rather than sudden outbreaks of conflict.

Second, people leave the region to pursue livelihoods. This is the area where there has been the most change in recent years. Tribal labor is desired in Delhi, especially the retail and hospitality industries. As Brosius' study of consumerism in Delhi has shown, these consumer spaces cater to the desire of the Indian upper and middle classes to "live abroad in India" (2010, 65). To truly experience this kind of status-driven consumption consumer spaces serving these classes have become denationalized, or to put it more crudely, de-Indianized. This has served the interests of tribal migrants. Most tribals from the Northeast have physical features similar to those of East and Southeast Asian peoples and their labor is in demand as they reproduce the de-Indianized aesthetic without the need to import foreign labor. Tribals are now a ubiquitous labor force in Delhi's upscale malls working in clothing stores, sports stores, spas and beauty stores, hotels, restaurants, and cafes. Tribal labor is also in demand in the call center industry. Foreign investment has led to a rapid increase in call centers in Delhi and the satellite cities of Gurgaon and Noida (Dupont 2011). Literature on call centers in India has identified the various tactics adopted to de-Indianize the accents and personalities of the labor force (Taylor and Bain 2005). Most tribals from the hill areas attend English medium schooling and English is also the *lingua franca* between different ethnic groups. In addition, most tribals in Delhi are unmarried and in their twenties. This makes them able to work shifts timed to serve Australian, European, and North American business hours. As such tribals have become desirable as a "flexible" and well-qualified workforce for the call center and hospitality industries. These jobs did not exist a decade ago and they pay better than jobs back home. Tribals are more willing to travel to Delhi

knowing there is a good chance of finding work through friends, relatives, and clan and tribal networks, and their family members are more willing to let them go.

Third, people leave the region to pursue changing social aspirations. Reservations for tribals in public sector employment have created a sizable middle class. The aspirations of this middle class are based around secure employment, consumer desires, and more physical mobility. Competition for jobs in the Northeast is high especially given the limited opportunities from decades of conflict. Getting ahead back home requires investment in tertiary education. Considering the poor quality of tertiary education institutions in the region, migration has become the norm for pursuing these aspirations. Delhi is the preferred destination as it is home to the best universities in India, most with reserved places for people from the Northeast, and is where the tools of the Indian bureaucracy can be learned. Migration to Delhi has become easier with a larger tribal community in Delhi and cheaper transport. Families back home are more willing and able to pay the costs of migration for education, and the new opportunities for tribal migrants to work to support their study has opened the city to a much broader cross-section of people from the Northeast.

Importantly men and women migrate together. This matters because unlike many other groups in South Asia and in other parts of the world, men are not migrating alone to forge a path or follow an established route leaving women and families behind (Broughton 2008; Datta et al. 2009; Osella and Osella 2000), nor are women migrating to work in different professions to men, as is the case in other locations (Constable 1997; Momsen 1999; Parreñas 2001). Thus, men experience migration *with* women from back home, not in isolation from them. They often find work in the same sectors, though there is the feeling among some migrants that it is easier for tribal women to find work than men. Both tribal men and women send remittances home when they can, though for many the costs of living in Delhi and the opportunities to spend make this difficult.

Tribal migrants consulted in this research were from all parts of the Northeast. Respondents migrated to Delhi from urban areas and from rural areas. Though most of those from rural areas spent at least some of their secondary school years in urban areas. In other words, there were few migrants who came directly from the remote hill areas to Delhi without time spent elsewhere. Most respondents were in their twenties. Among older respondents most of those in their thirties had come to Delhi in their twenties and stayed or come to Delhi from another city such as Bangalore or Kolkata. Respondents in their forties were usually professionals or academics, with a small number of central government employees and church clergy. Respondents ranged from migrants who have come to Delhi to work, those who have come to work and study, those who have come only to study, and those that began doing one but have now started doing the other. There is also a smaller group doing neither.

Economic inclusion into the city is countered by social exclusion. In Delhi, this manifests in racism, discrimination, harassment, and violence. For tribals, racism defines the ways they experience Delhi. Complex ethnic identities that characterize life in the Northeast are dismantled in Delhi as tribals are lumped into a singular



category differentiated from the Indian mainstream. Tribals are judged based on ascriptive notions derived from their physical features. They *look* different to the other peoples inhabiting Delhi making it “difficult for them to escape from their ethnic identity if they wish to” (Eriksen 2002, 6).

According to the NESCH, 86 percent of tribals experience racial discrimination in Delhi (NESCH 2011a, 21). All respondents in this research brought up racism as the main negative of living in Delhi. Racism is epitomized by the epithet “chinky.” During fieldwork, the author has spent weeks commuting, eating, shopping, and living with tribals in Delhi and people would call out “chinky” frequently particularly in places where tribals were outnumbered. Tribal migrants also hear the term in their workplace, from other students in their classes at university, and even from nontribal friends. Epithets matter because they reflect deeply embedded stereotypes that have material impacts on the lives of tribal migrants. Stereotypes include tribals are backward and uncivilized, tribals are antinational and anti-India, tribals are violent, and tribals are loose and immoral. These stereotypes carry over into discrimination in the housing market, in the labor market (despite the tribal niche), and with the authorities, especially when attempting to seek justice for harassment and violence. Individual cases of harassment and violence are documented in the media in the Northeast and among support organizations in Delhi and are too numerous to detail here. Qualitative accounts of respondents reflect the frequency of harassment and the ongoing anxiety that exemplifies movement around the city.

### *“They Don’t Even Want Our Protection”; Disoriented Masculinity*

Migration to Delhi challenges tribal masculinity. It moves tribal men away from the environment where their masculinity is produced and also gives tribal women new opportunities for independence and mobility. Here, the author will focus on the two main challenges discussed by respondents: (1) gender relations and (2) purposelessness.

*Gender relations.* Most respondents whether men or women felt that tribal women coped better with migration than tribal men. Putting aside harassment and violence for the moment, tribal women appear to thrive in Delhi. Their labor is desired in the consumer spaces of malls, spas, restaurants, and call centers giving many of them financial independence that they do not have at home. This is not to suggest that back home there is a stigma against women’s participation in the labor force (see above), rather the age at which most tribals migrate and limited employment opportunities back home mean that many tribal women undertake paid work for the first time in Delhi. Without reliable statistics, it is difficult to determine whether women work more than men or whether they get paid more or less than men. However, many respondents felt that it is easier for women to find work, often attributing this to the sexualized roles demanded by the hospitality and retail sectors. Working women are able to engage in conspicuous consumption, particularly of fashion and food.

Stereotypes about tribal women being loose and subject to a separate moral order are enhanced by the visibility of tribal women in restaurants and bars allegedly “living it up,” though many are actually working at these places.

Many tribal men work, but few like to spend money on going out and most prefer to stay at home among other tribals. Respondents gave many reasons for this. First, going out in Delhi is expensive. Most establishments charge up to 30 percent in taxes on top of the bill. While many children of the elite can afford this students and most working migrants cannot. Even those that can afford it prefer to save the money for when they return home, especially those that plan to get married, or to send home as remittances. Second, tribal men are hesitant to go out because they felt they were provoked. Men commented that they were often refused entry into establishments based on their ethnicity and the assumption they will act violently. Respondents also felt that nontribals deliberately provoked them into fights while others commented that they constantly had to intervene when nontribals made unwelcome advances on tribal women. Third, most respondents found going out boring. They would rather stay in and eat tribal food and drink cheaper alcohol. They preferred sitting at home, playing guitar, singing, and playing cards. Many tribal women enjoy this too, though a number of female respondents felt that this got boring and was too much like home. As one female respondent from Manipur put it, staying in meant watching tribal men get drunk, talk about politics, and then cleaning up after them, something she grew up doing at home. In Delhi, women wanted to go out and try new food, meet new people, and be “seen.” The lack of interest shown by most tribal men in doing these things cast them as unromantic, boring, and provincial, in contrast to the urbane tastes of women. It should be noted that in virtually all towns and cities in the Northeast restaurants and bars close in the early evening because of curfews and in rural areas no such establishments exist. In Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland alcohol is banned, though it is available on the black-market. Thus for tribal migrants, Delhi offers opportunities to go out on the town that do not exist back home. Though seemingly these opportunities are more attractive to women than men. Some tribal men reported changing their behavior to be more outgoing, while others complained that tribal women changed after they migrated and wanted to be treated differently to home.

Several male respondents resented tribal women going out on the town and resented the ways tribal women are represented in the labor market. It is interesting to note that men also work in similar jobs but do not feel that this carries the same problems for them as it does for women as their employment in these sectors is more limited. To clarify, limited in the sense that some of the more sexualized jobs such as working in spas and nail salons, fashion boutiques (with the exception of suits), and as models at cars shows and other exhibitions are usually closed to tribal males. They felt that the highly sexualized representation of tribal women in the retail and services sector perpetuated stereotypes and made by the mainstream population about tribal women’s morality. Others felt that it made them targets for sexual harassment

and sexual violence. This causes tensions in gender relations and also a diminishing lack of control over tribal women's sexuality and morality.

As migration from the Northeast has grown rapidly in the last half decade, the familial configuration of migrants is also changing. The most notable change is siblings migrating to Delhi together. By migrating as siblings one or more of the family can work while the others study. This is especially common among middle-income and poorer families who do not have the money to send their children to study or that want to get their children out of the region as quickly as possible. Among migrants from the most volatile areas of the Northeast, in particular from the hill areas of Manipur, female migrants are working to support their siblings, usually male siblings. One respondent, a woman from the Naga areas of Manipur working in an antiques shop, works full time to support two younger brothers who were completing their college study. She said she also wanted to study but unless she worked, her brothers would have to go back to a dangerous environment and terrible schools. Similar examples could be found throughout the migrant population. The reverse, tribal men working to support female siblings, was more unusual. This has a curious affect on gender relations: it has furthered the idea that it is easier for tribal women to find work than for men, meaning many men stop looking. Men depend more on females for survival and women have begun to resent having to look after their male siblings. As one female respondent quipped, "why would you want to go home and marry a tribal man after working in Delhi for years looking after your brothers?"

Academic success also creates some resentment. Though there is scant numerical evidence to support it, the perception among tribals in Delhi is that men drop out of university and college far more frequently than women. As discussed earlier in this article, there are few barriers to education in the Northeast based on gender, especially in the tribal areas, yet once in Delhi women seem to thrive in universities and colleges and men seem to struggle. Many drop out after taking up work while others drop out after bad grades. Explanations varied from alcoholism, laziness, immaturity, and no ambition. Though there was a strong feeling that many tribal men in Delhi are simply despondent with depression. This will be discussed further in the following section.

All of these feelings come to head around sexual relationships. It is difficult to comment on the frequency of relationships between tribals and nontribals with any accuracy. All that can be gauged from the perceptions of respondents is that they are more common between tribal women and nontribal men; including Indian men and men of other nationalities especially African migrants. There are relationships between tribal men and nontribal women though these are less common. Indeed, relationships between tribal women and nontribal men are far more visible in the tribal enclaves and campuses in Delhi.<sup>3</sup> So why are there more relationships between tribal women and nontribal men? Respondents gave a number of answers. First, as discussed above tribal men are perceived to be boring and unromantic and incompatible with the aspirations and lifestyles of many tribal women. Second, nontribal men are perceived to target tribal women owing to the stereotypes that they are more

promiscuous. Third, tribal women have more contact with nontribals from the types of work they do and the kind of courses they study and because they go out more. Most respondents seemed far from convinced when giving these explanations.

Responses to these relationships vary and do include acceptance though more often than not such relationships lead to tensions. Tensions occur between tribal men and tribal women over their choices of partner, between tribal men and nontribal men over interference with “their” women, and between tribal women and nontribal women over the alleged “loose” behavior of tribal women.

Among tribal migrants, tribal women face disapproval from tribal men, and indeed other tribal women, for their choice of partner, but also disapproval from friends and relatives back home. Many tribal men (and some tribal women it must be noted) felt that nontribal males are using the tribal woman and cannot be serious about the relationship. Several respondents had negative experiences with such relationships, as when it came time to get serious many nontribals would not tell their families about their tribal partners and vice versa. This affirmed the belief among tribal men that tribal women were being duped. Respondents singled out relationships between tribal women and African men. African migrants in Delhi are usually always males. Many have difficulty finding housing due to hardened racist attitudes among north Indian landlords and they end up living in the same areas as tribals and attend the same churches. A number of tribal men felt that African migrants go after tribal women so that they can get access to housing and stay in the country longer. The murder of a Kuki woman by her Nigerian boyfriend in May 2011 and the attempted rape of a Mizo woman by a group of African males in daylight outside a Delhi shopping mall have added fuel to these perceptions (NESCH 2011b, 2011c).

In extreme cases, tribal men threaten and intimidate women from their tribe who are in relationships with nontribals or suspected to be. Intimidation is also extended to the nontribal male in question. Respondents related incidents when different tribal student unions became involved and a few cases when ethno-nationalist organizations from back home became involved. In one incident related by a female respondent from Manipur, ethno-nationalist groups from back home learned of two women migrants spending time with Indian males and contacted their families in Manipur warning them to take action. They threatened to publicize the names and addresses of the two women in Delhi if they did not cease this behavior. The topic of relationships is popular on tribal blogs, chat rooms, and discussion boards. In one recent posting concerning a Manipuri (Meitei ethnicity) women marrying outside the ethnic group one participant argued that when Manipuri women marry other men the culture is lost but when Manipuri men marry other women the culture is preserved necessitating policing of Meitei woman for the good of the Meitei nation (Manipur Talks 2010). Such views are common among other ethnic and tribal groups as well.

Protecting the tribe or ethnic group from the influx of migrants and the abuses of the armed forces are a central component of masculinity back home. Back home tribals are usually the majority community and pressure can be applied to nontribal

males and the families of errant tribal women. In Delhi leverage is more limited. As one respondent from Nagaland noted, “they (women) don’t even want our protection.” In Delhi, tribal men are confronted by the clash between their desires to protect women from their tribe away from home in a dangerous city and the reality that this protection is often unwanted. In fact, the more they try to protect the more divisive gender relations become. In response, tribal males adapt or confront, but more often than not they are confused. Several respondents expressed an urge to marry a tribal woman from back home, rather than one that has been living in Delhi. As one respondent from Nagaland put it, he needed a “God fearing woman” from Nagaland rather than a Naga woman who had been living in Delhi. Again this was not a universal sentiment, but one expressed often enough to indicate a growing feeling that migration was taking tribal men and women in different directions.

*Purposelessness.* Migration leaves tribals “stuck in Delhi” and far from the action back home. This led to a sense of purposelessness among many tribal men. This is complicated by the ways that the politics of home are enacted in Delhi and the limited opportunities to take on traditional roles. Migration has politicized some tribals. A number of respondents mentioned that they were never interested in politics back home but became interested after migrating to Delhi. For some this was because their parents tried to protect them from politics while for others it was simply because they left home at seventeen or eighteen and thus could not understand the gravity of what was going on around them. Others from areas that have been relatively peaceful in their lifetime did not think about the issues that affected the North-east more widely until they reached Delhi. As one respondent from Arunachal Pradesh put it, only when he came to Delhi did he see what he called the “true colors” of the Indian state. In Delhi, there are new opportunities to engage in the politics of home, especially on pantribal issues. As discussed in the previous section, this adds to the perception (especially among tribal women) that tribal men are fixated with the politics of home. For men discussing politics helps to affirm identity and masculinity, yet it also casts them in a poor light among many tribal women. The risks of engaging in politics left many tribal men without a sense of purpose, especially considering peers and elders back home were often heavily involved in politics.

In contrast, most male respondents expressed caution in sharing political views with other migrants as they feared jeopardizing friendships. Friendships in Delhi are too valuable as tribals depended on one another to get jobs, to find a place to live, to borrow money, or to shelter to get through tough times. Expressing political views, even among members of the same ethnic or tribal group can jeopardize these friendships. A number of respondents commented that they have seen the divisiveness of politics back home and are careful not to bring that to Delhi. One respondent, a postgraduate student from Manipur, said that people are very cautious to express political positions on contentious issues from back home because

tribals in Delhi are not all exiles; the sons and daughters of police chiefs live and study alongside the sons and daughters of underground insurgent leaders. Furthermore, ethno-nationalist groups from home as well as state intelligence agents keep tabs on tribals in Delhi.

For a number of tribal migrants this triggered strong feelings of guilt. Seeking refuge from militarized environments drives tribals to Delhi, but they leave behind peers and relatives who choose to remain behind to pursue one cause or another. One respondent from the Naga areas of Manipur remarked that he has cousins back home campaigning everyday against the abuses of the armed forces and he was in Delhi working in a call center. It made him feel useless.

The kind of work available to tribal men in Delhi is similar, if more limited, than that available to tribal women. While this has created opportunities for migrants it is also seen as lower status work than what men would like to be doing back home. Unemployment is high at home, but those with work are farming, running businesses, working in the government, or contracting for the government. Working in Delhi is more temporary and involves working for others. One respondent, a male from Nagaland, spoke at length about this. He was tired of going from job to job in call centers and restaurants. He really wanted to go back to Nagaland and start a business but felt it was impossible because nontribal traders control businesses back home. This made him very depressed.

With politics muted there are others ways for migrants to enact tribal masculinity in Delhi. Most notable is the acceptance of clan duties among young men. As most tribals migrate without their parents and there are very few middle-aged and elder tribal migrants in Delhi, clan duties are taken on by men at a younger age than at home. Clan duties are important, as clans are crucial links to home and networks of support in Delhi. One of the most compelling instances of this during fieldwork followed the death of a member of the Lotha tribe/clan (part of the apex Naga ethnic group). The young man in his early twenties passed away on a Friday night after drinking alcohol and falling asleep. His flatmate then notified other members of the clan, one of whom related the story to me a few days later. A group of five Lothas accompanied the body to have an autopsy at the hospital. They waited for several hours and ensured the body could be stored for another day. Throughout Sunday, they asked the Lotha community in Delhi for contributions to send the body home and raise money for the funeral back in Nagaland. Through clan networks, churches, phone calls, and neighborhood visits they raised 1.5 lakh rupees (3,400 USD). The body was flown back to Nagaland on Monday morning. The respondent relating the story said that he did not even know the deceased but he had to fulfill his clan duty and had spent three full days away from his job at a call center mobilizing clan members. The deceased was alone in Delhi and there were no elders, parents, or siblings to watch out for him and this meant the clan had to step in. These tragedies enable tribal males to take on roles of responsibility and enact traditional masculinity in tough times.

### *Subalterns and Seoul-Brothers: New Masculinities*

Challenges to masculinity are paralleled by new ways of expressing tribal masculinity. In making this point, the author is not suggesting that there is a linear progression between the masculinity of home and “new” masculinities in Delhi. Rather new ways of expressing masculinity do not necessarily replace old ones, but migration to Delhi necessitates the adoption of more fluid ways of being masculine and also makes these expressions more possible and visible than back home. The author will focus on two of these: (1) subaltern masculinity and (2) cosmopolitan masculinity.

*Subaltern masculinity.* For tribal men being a minority community in Delhi can be very emasculating. In practice, it means that tribals cannot retaliate in the face of racism and discrimination, whereas at home they can. The author does not wish to portray tribal males as inherently violent, and this is a damaging stereotype against which they must continually battle, rather he wants to point out the frustration respondents felt at having to put up with discrimination that they would not have to put up with at home. Tribals deal with this frustration by adapting to minority status and producing a subaltern masculinity. By this the author means many tribal men come to relish their role as outsiders and take pride in navigating and surviving the city for themselves and other members of the tribe and clan.

Subaltern masculinity can be seen in a number of activities. First is navigating the labor market. Despite the demand for tribal labor being able to navigate the labor market can be the key to finding decent work. In time, many tribal men look down on the work they are doing, as mentioned above, but being in work and being able to get work for others has become an important male role. For tribal males who have been in Delhi for a while, usually a year or more, helping a new arrival find work by introducing them to a call center boss, labor agent, or shop manager demonstrates their familiarity with the city and their own survival skills. Several respondents discussed the ways they help train new arrivals from their clan or hometown for job interviews. One respondent, a male from Nagaland who had been in Delhi for five years, discussed how he taught new arrivals how to negotiate a starting salary and how to make eye contact during interviews (not a natural instinct among tribals). He reported that many members of his social network owed their employment to his knowledge of surviving Delhi.

Second is negotiating with landlords. As many new arrivals cannot speak Hindi well, tribals who have been in Delhi for a year or more will often negotiate on their behalf. Yet, the role of negotiator becomes even more important for tribal men because they feel they can impose their physical presence on landlords during these negotiations, particularly on behalf of female tribals. This is crucial when there are disputes over rent or complaints by tribal tenants against their landlords. Sexual harassment by nontribal landlords against female tribal tenants is not uncommon. In a recent case from April 2011, a north Indian landlord had installed a camera in the

room of one of this female tenants, a Hmar tribal working in a Delhi restaurant, who shared a flat with her brother. When the brother confronted the landlord he was violently beaten by the landlord and other nontribal tenants in the neighborhood (NESCH 2011d). In this role that tribal males are able to enact some way of protecting fellow tribals from the city.

Third is creating subaltern knowledge of the city. The tribal “map” of Delhi looks very different to most other ways of knowing the city. Knowing where to worship, where to live, where to get food, and where to shop makes tribal males interlocutors for new arrivals. During fieldwork, the author accompanied tribals on missions across the city to find fresh pork, usually bought from south Indians, and fresh beef, usually bought from Muslim butchers. Certain markets had the kinds of vegetables tribals eat. Neighbors, friends, and clan members would know someone who had recently been back home and had a fresh supply of fermented bamboo shoots and were willing to share which usually necessitated a trip to a particular tribal enclave. Knowing how much things should cost in Delhi is equally important, especially when it comes to rent (see above) and rickshaw fares. Almost all tribals are dependent on either auto or pedal rickshaws to get around Delhi. Relations with rickshaw drivers are taken as barometers of tribal migrants’ knowledge of Delhi. Recent arrivals spoke of the hassle of negotiating with drivers and the fatigue at being constantly overcharged and having to argue. Whereas those who had been in Delhi for longer used their successful negotiations with auto drivers as evidence they can handle the city and that they would not be cheated. They also used it as an indicator of improving Hindi language skills, a language they rarely speak elsewhere. Tribals pride themselves on being to navigate and negotiate these different worlds within Delhi. For tribal men, this is particularly important as it gives a sense of purpose and allows them to assume some elements of their role as protectors and enablers.

*Cosmopolitan masculinity.* Tribal identity is predicated on differentiation from the Indian mainstream. For tribal men, migration to Delhi brings them in much closer contact with mainstream Indian society and many have developed new ways of differentiating their masculinity. They do this by comparing themselves to Indian men and by drawing on cosmopolitan cultural influences. Regarding the former, this involves casting Indian men as treating women poorly and at the same time being excessively mothered. In contrast, tribal men cast themselves as having more harmonious gender relations, evident in shared households, support networks, the aforementioned protection of tribal women. Furthermore, tribal men view Indian men as predatory in contrast to their supportive clan-based networks. They see themselves as resourceful, independent, and capable compared to Indians in their equivalent class group who they see as dependent on domestic help and privilege.

Regarding the latter tribal males shape their masculinity through cosmopolitan and decidedly un-Indian cultural influences. Tribal men in Delhi cast themselves as worldly cosmopolitans in contrast to their depiction as backward frontier dwellers



in mainstream society. Cosmopolitanism is demonstrated through knowledge of western and Asian music, film, and fashion. Particularly notable is replicating Korean pop culture and global hip-hop culture. In the Northeast Korean pop culture has a huge appeal among men and women (Kshetrimayum and Chanu 2008; Sunita 2010). Korean pop culture is thought to be more realistic than the Indian version. As respondents in Delhi and back in the Northeast pointed out, the Korean actors look like them, they are mostly Christian, they are always involved in love stories, and there is no singing and raunchy dancing like Indian films. Engaging Korean popular culture is a way of resisting Indian cultural domination. In Delhi, Korean hairdressers and simple restaurants (as opposed to more expensive ones aimed at Korean expats) have grown in tribal inhabited areas in Delhi often staffed by tribals. Korean DVD stalls are found in tribal neighborhoods. For tribal men, Korean pop culture creates an odd juxtaposition. The fascination with Korean pop culture brings an androgynous metro sexuality to the warrior image. Styled spiky hair, hair dyes, Korean street fashion, and an appreciation for Korean films and food have become important expressions of cosmopolitan masculinity. Regarding hip-hop culture this is expressed in dress: sneakers, basketball jerseys, baggy skateboarding jeans, and of course tribal rappers. Often the two influences are combined and overlap, as they do in other parts of Asia; but rarely in India. Rock music is also popular and the Northeast has a number of rock festivals and has spawned a number of bands; many of which make their living playing shows in Delhi and other cities. For tribal men, un-Indian cultural influences allow them to be more urbane and less parochial, but continue to differentiate them from the Indian mainstream and thus preserve the key element of their identity.

### *Reading Masculinity and Migration*

What does this case tell us about masculinity? First, tribal masculinity is challenged by migration. Migration is having a gendered impact: women thrive while men struggle. Replicating gender roles from home exacerbates tensions leaving tribal males to contemplate the clash between their desire to protect women from their tribe and the reality that many tribal women do not want this protection. Second, migration distances tribal men and women from the sites where gender roles are constructed and reproduced. For tribal men being “stuck in Delhi” triggers feelings of purposefulness and guilt. This suggests that internal migration from areas of conflict impacts on masculinity in profound ways. Migrants are in Delhi working and studying while friends and relatives are back home being “real men.” Engaging in the politics of home is possible in Delhi, but many tribals were wary of open political expression. One of the few ways to enact male roles from home is through clan responsibilities, but these opportunities can be few. Third, tribal males find new roles as subaltern urban dwellers, they become protectors and enablers able to navigate and survive the city. This in turn allows them to compare themselves favorably to the Indian mainstream and their perceptions of Indian masculinity. Far from home

new expressions of masculinity are more visible and also more necessary as a minority community in the city. Tribal males latch onto western and Asian cultural influences to partially reshape what it means to be a tribal man. Importantly such new expressions coexist alongside more conventional expressions of masculinity, showing the fluidity of masculinity even among a group where masculine norms appear rigidly defined.

What might this indicate about masculinity and gender relations beyond this case? This research has implications for the study of the impacts of migration on masculinity among ethnic minorities, particularly in contexts wherein conflict, ethno-nationalism or strong separatist tendencies have shaped masculine norms. Given the number of such contexts throughout the world this needs further investigation and international comparisons can be drawn through further research. In this case, the author simply asks the question of what happens when men are removed from that context, and in particular when men and women are removed together.

It also adds further material to research conducted on the fluidity of masculinity. From existing research we know that masculinities are fluid, but what propels this fluidity? The answers are both complex and contingent. In this case, migration is a catalyst for fluidity because of the ruptures it can bring to gendered identities and practices. While ample attention is given to international migration, more attention needs to be paid to the ways internal migration can be similarly rupturing to masculinity. In this case, the key rupture comes from moving out of zones of conflict where masculinity is rooted in ethno-nationalist politics and armed struggle and into an urban landscape far from home, but still within the boundaries of the nation-state. Clearly masculinity is not stable. It is fluid and intersected by other axis of differentiation. What makes this case so compelling is that tribal masculinity is experiencing a moment of excessive fluidity sparked by migration.

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## Notes

1. Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland.
2. Statistics on alcohol use published in state summaries of the most recent *National Family Health Survey* (MHFW 2009) show that Northeast states without bans have very high alcohol use and prevalence rates (Arunachal Pradesh has the highest in India among men), men are at least more than twice as likely to use alcohol and use it more regularly than women. In states with alcohol bans usage is still high, though likely an underestimate and far more men drink than women. Though this is inconsistent when Nagaland is considered. In Mizoram, the ratio of men drinking alcohol to women drinking is 42:1, in Manipur it is 23:1, in Nagaland it is 4:1, by comparison in Meghalaya which has no ban it is 12:1.
3. There are also relationships between tribal men and nontribal men and tribal women and nontribal women but these were not discussed at all by respondents.

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