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Wayfinding: Indigenous Migrants in the Service Sector of Metropolitan India

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, large numbers of indigenous youth from the uplands of Northeast India have migrated to metropolitan cities across the country. Many end up in the new service sector, getting jobs in high-end restaurants, shopping malls and spas. The demand for their labour is due to their un-Indian 'exotic Asian' appearance and a reputation for being hardworking and loyal. Such labour market value is a remarkable reversal of their position considering the earlier colonial stereotypes of their savagery and disobedience, reproduced through the de-politicisation of their armed insurrections during the post-colonial period. This paper addresses their daily experiences of vulnerability and marginality as well as the freedom and aspirations that a migratory life seem to engender.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous peoples; Kerala; labour; migration; neo-liberal service sector; Northeast India; stretched lifeworlds

It was the second time we were meeting with Choro—this time in his home, a two-bedroom apartment where he lived with his wife and three-year-old daughter. A few weeks earlier, we had visited his workplace, one of the top five-star hotels in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala. Choro had heard about our research and, as soon as we sat down, he began telling us a story about a magical stone he had found in the village where he grew up in the hills of Manipur, a state adjacent to the border of Myanmar. It was a rare blue stone, traditionally used for ritual purposes, which he had brought along to Thiruvananthapuram. During the last year, Choro's family had faced exceptional misfortune and Choro had been forced to travel back and forth to his home village, exhausting most of his savings on airfares and medical treatments for sick family members. In a dream he learned that it was the stone that was causing all this ill fate. After consulting his mother, he threw the stone into a lake. After this, things started to improve, he conveyed cautiously.

Despite a successful career in the service sector that has made him a senior manager of one of the hotel's restaurants, Choro claimed he could think of nothing else than to return home, to the hills of Manipur. His family was there and he had several younger siblings in need of monetary support and encouragement to finish school. The plan was to settle in Ukhrul, the nearest town and the district headquarters, mainly populated by Tangkhul Nagas, the ethnic group to which he and his wife belong. The question they struggled

with was how to make a living there. They wanted to start some kind of business, but were still trying to figure out what. Choro was from a family of musicians and he was considering taking up music again, perhaps to start a music school. His wife was interested in clothing and fashion and was learning design during her hours off from long shifts at the hotel. This, she believed, could be something to build on.

Choro has been on the migration route, moving between various cities and workplaces in South India, for more than fifteen years. Today he spends most of his waking hours in the ultra-modern setting of a luxury hotel, interacting with people from various parts of the world. It all appeared natural to him, talking and walking with the confidence of someone who seems to embody a modern, global subjectivity. Yet this cosmopolitan sensibility apparently did not displace the cultural dispositions and lifeworld of the community back home, perhaps on the contrary. Choro had earlier bought some land in his home village, not to cultivate, but, as he put it, to maintain for sentimental reasons.¹ He told us that due to a curse issued long ago by the pre-colonial ruler, the Manipuri raja, the land in the village was more or less infertile. Magic stones and cursed infertile land are, we argue, as present and haunting to him as his new life in the high-end hospitality industry in metropolitan India.

In this paper, we are concerned with the lives and lifeworlds of indigenous migrants like Choro who have travelled from the faraway northeastern frontier to the expanding cities of South India. Their movement does not involve the crossing of any international borders, yet, both geographically and culturally, it is a movement into a very different place. It is a movement away from predominantly rural livelihoods with subsistence agriculture and politics revolving around ethnic homelands, with armed struggles and massive human rights violations and a corrupt local state structure, to a life in major Indian cities, where migrants are seen as outsiders, yet where their un-Indian looks and English-language skills help them obtain relatively well-paid jobs in the growing global service sector.² The category 'indigenous migrants' is not clear-cut, but broadly refers to people who are categorised by the state as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and who also self-identify and assert themselves as tribal or indigenous, but who live and work outside their home regions. The two terms, tribal and indigenous, are often used interchangeably in Northeast India, and in India more generally, but can, in some contexts, evoke different political or affective registers.³

This article is part of a larger research project in which we examine why an increasing number of indigenous youth from Northeast India have started to emigrate during

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1. James Ferguson, 'How to Do Things with Land: A Distributive Perspective on Rural Livelihoods in Southern Africa', in *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2013), pp. 166–74. Land, as Ferguson suggests, has many more uses than just those relating to agriculture, for example as a source of attachment and, increasingly in the case of South Africa, as a node in the circulation of government welfare payments.
 2. Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, 'The "Indian Face", India's Northeast, and "The Idea of India"', in *Asian Anthropology*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (2013), pp. 126–40. As Wouters and Subba note, northeastern phenotypes such as 'high cheekbones and yellowish skin tones have not found a place in common imaginaries of the Indian Face'. Even if this is a main source of marginalisation, it has paradoxically also opened up new avenues of employment (p. 127). Regarding racism in India, see Duncan MacDuie-Ra, 'Is India Racist?: Murder, Migration and Mary Kom', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2015), pp. 304–19.
 3. Bengt G. Karlsson, 'Anthropology and the "Indigenous Slot": Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples' Status in India', in *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, no. 4 (2003), pp. 403–23; and Bengt G. Karlsson, 'The Social Life of Categories: Affirmative Action and Trajectories of Indigenes', in *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, Vol. 2013, no. 65 (2013), pp. 33–41.

the last decade. This mobility has to be understood in the context of an affirmative action regime and a political culture that privilege sedentarism—that is, that people stay put in one place and claim rights to ancestral territories.⁴ Along with geographer Tim Cresswell, we seek to explore ‘how particular forms of mobility become meaningful and what other movements are enabled or constrained in the process’ of such migration.⁵

We focus on what labour migration to the south and to the metropolis entails in relation to caring for family members and community in the hills. We aim to assess the cultural fissures at work in people’s attachment to the places of their travels. Young indigenous migrants seem to be on a journey without a fixed destination, struggling to make out what and where home is. We refer to this as wayfinding:⁶ a journey without a map or pathway to follow, with no clear destination or end point, but rather a form of movement in which the traveller constantly adjusts direction, seeking out new places and possibilities as he or she is moving on.

The paper has four main sections. We begin by discussing migration research and the significance of long-distance migration without border-crossings, eventually suggesting that the type of indigenous migration we are concerned with has some special qualities to it. In the following section, we look at the situation in Kerala, one of the emerging migration destinations for people from the Northeast. In the third section, we focus on three individual migrants and their stories. Finally, through the notions of ‘stretched lifeworlds’ and ‘being haunted’, we seek to unravel what it entails to inhabit this particular migratory space.

As part of this project, we undertook a multi-sited ethnography from 2013 to 2015. This ethnographic essay is based on six months of fieldwork that Karlsson conducted in South India, mainly in Kerala, but also during visits to Bengaluru, Hyderabad and other major cities in the south, and on follow-up trips to Northeast India. Kikon joined the fieldwork for shorter periods, carrying out parallel research at other sites in Northeast India and metropolitan Mumbai. Applying a multi-sited approach, we followed a number of tribal migrants closely, meeting them at their workplaces and homes, and in some cases visiting them and their families back in Northeast India. Some of these people we knew beforehand; in other instances, it was people we met at restaurants or in public places such as bus stands, train stations or on the street. In some instances, this turned into formalised interviews, but often they were just informal discussions and reflections made on the go.

4. Special constitutional provisions have been granted to several hill communities in Northeast India through the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. For Meghalaya, see Bengt G. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011).

5. Tim Cresswell, ‘The Production of Mobilities’, in *New Formations*, Issue 43 (Spring 2001), pp. 11–25. Currently we are working on a monograph titled *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration from the Resource Frontier to the Urban Sprawl in India*, based on this research project conducted between 2013 and 2015.

6. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011). We borrow the notion of wayfinding from anthropologist Tim Ingold, but use it in a metaphoric, less precise manner.

Indigenous Migration

Migration seems self-explanatory: people move somewhere else in search of a better life, to avail themselves of new possibilities or to escape misery and hardship. Every migration has its own social and historical particularities, and for every individual migrant, there are specific circumstances or reasons why he or she decided, or felt compelled, to leave home. Understanding migration, in that sense, can be an endlessly complicated endeavour. The present movement of indigenous youth from the northeastern hills to the Indian ‘mainland’ can be linked to a number of structural features, such as high levels of insecurity and violence, a non-functional local state, lack of educational facilities, a stagnant economy, dependence on subsistence farming, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources.⁷ These, arguably, have snowballed into the present situation where the young are seeking a new life outside the region in an unprecedented manner.

But leaving the hills for the Indian mainland is a deeply charged act. It is construed locally as a betrayal of sorts. To what extent can individuals, as well as communities, hold on to land in a situation where the young move out and away from agriculture? This question is critical, given that since Independence, the political struggle in the northeastern hills has been for indigenous self-determination, which represents a challenge to the Indian state’s supremacy in this frontier region. Furthermore, migration goes against the grain of much of the thinking of indigenous peoples who are deeply attached to the land. Control of land, especially alienation of land to outsiders, is one of the key drivers of ethnic animosity and inter-community violence in the region.⁸ There is an affirmative action regime in place in the northeastern hills to prevent land alienation, which bars people who do not belong to the Scheduled Tribes from owning land in the various northeastern states.⁹ In our research experience, migration does not seem to entail the young giving up their indigenous identity, as exemplified by Choro’s stone story, nor their support for the ethnic struggles of their respective communities. Several of the youths we spoke with had a background in ethnic student organisations—some had even been part of ethnic militia groups—and they all closely followed political developments in their home states. Several of them were also members of particular denominations or ethnic organisations in the south, which again affirms that migration is not about leaving one’s community. What their mobility does entail, however, is a move away from agriculture—that is, the young migrants do not want to cultivate the land any longer and apparently neither do they envision their lives as evolving within the space of ancestral territory. They seek something else, another way of being indigenous.

New and unexpected possibilities have also been opening up for English-speaking youth within the service economy in Indian cities. In his recent book, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*, Duncan McDuie-Ra points to a new economic niche

7. See, for example, Irudaya S. Rajan and Rikhil Chyrmang, ‘Labour Migration in the North East’, in D.K. Mishra (ed.), *Internal Migration in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2016).

8. Land alienation and conflict over land are some of the reasons why local people, above all the indigenous Tiwa tribals, joined the extensive killings of Muslim peasants in the Nellie area of central Assam in 1983. Japanese scholar Makiko Kimura discusses this critical event in her recent book, *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013).

9. Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*.

available to racialised northeastern subjects in the cosmopolitan cityscape of metropolitan India such as jobs in high-end restaurants, shopping malls and spas. He writes:

In these global spaces, Northeasterners perform these roles because they look, speak, and act 'un-Indian'. They are not associated with a particular caste, religious or regional group within the boundaries of mainstream India. They are simultaneously neutral and exotic. Their high visibility in Delhi is recent, owing to the surge in migration, and thus they act as a new labour force to complement the new consumer spaces of the global city. The labour force crafted through orientalist exotica, mixed at times with a sense of East Asian cool, constructs a space that is in India but not of India; perfect for 'world-class' aspirants of the middle classes.¹⁰

What McDuie-Ra noted for Delhi also holds true for other major cities, not least the South Indian metropolitan areas that we are concerned with here.

In the recent collection of essays titled *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, James Clifford argues that if the 1980s and 1990s were concerned with indigenous histories of survival, struggle and renewal, towards the end of the twentieth century, one began to see a new form of indigenous becoming that built on a strategy of 'pragmatic engagements with global powers, with diverse capitalisms, and with particular national hegemonies'.¹¹ We think that this is a useful point of departure in understanding what is going on with these young indigenous migrants.

While working and studying in Delhi, Bengaluru, Pune, Mumbai, Thiruvananthapuram or other major cities, these youngsters have developed a more inclusive sense of self when they, along with their ethnic attachments that identify them as northeasterners, simultaneously seek recognition as Indian citizens; they state: 'we are also Indian' or, alternatively, 'we are not outsiders'.¹² It is not that they deny their difference and the importance of their indigenous histories and collective aspirations, but that they seem to take a more pragmatic attitude to life, embracing the wider possibilities that exist outside the Northeast and seeking job openings and education in these rather distant and somewhat hostile places.

The field of migration research suffers from a kind of border fetish. Being a migrant implies crossing borders and the border-crossing itself is usually perceived as most traumatic, a life-changing event that comes to constitute the future life of the migrant.¹³ Certainly at a time when there are horrifying stories of hardship and the deaths of refugees fleeing the war in Syria, or of young aspirational Africans enduring arduous journeys through deserts, stranded for months at the high-tech borders of Europe and eventually lured onto unseaworthy boats by unscrupulous smugglers,¹⁴ borders and border-crossing seem highly critical in grappling with the contemporary predicaments of migrants. Yet it is still worth remembering that globally, the majority of migrants are internal migrants

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

11. James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

12. Protesting northeastern youths were making such claims after the killing of student Nido Tania from Arunachal Pradesh. They were seeking inclusion and rights as Indian citizens. See Bengt G. Karlsson, 'Bonnie Guest House: Fieldwork and Friendship across Borders', in A. Baishya and Y. Saikia (eds), *Northeast India: A Place of Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

13. Seth M. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2013).

14. Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

who remain within their country of origin, and hence lack the experience or trauma of border-crossing. The total number of migrants in the world is estimated to be about one billion, of whom a little less than a quarter are migrants who have crossed an international border.¹⁵

In the wake of the last decades' hype around globalisation, migration research has mainly been concerned with transnational migration and diaspora, with people pursuing a new life by crossing international borders. Internal migration, by contrast, has almost disappeared off the radar of migration research.¹⁶ In the case of India, the situation is somewhat better, with recent work undertaken on rural–urban migration, as well as studies directly concerned with the mobility of tribal or indigenous communities.¹⁷ In the case of tribal or indigenous communities, the focus is commonly on cyclical or seasonal migration where members of rural households work during certain times of the year on urban construction sites or in brick mills and return to their homes during the peak agriculture season. In the comings and goings of these migrants, there are certainly dramatic events, but not in the sense of the heightened tensions associated with border-crossings, where entry into another country can put a person on a radically different life course. The type of indigenous migration addressed here is neither the transnational one, nor the cyclical internal one. There are important similarities with both these forms of migration, but also differences that we will begin to explore now.

One striking aspect is that we are concerned with migrants from a frontier region where people from the early colonial period were considered as wild and savage races who engaged in head-hunting, animal sacrifice and constant tribal warfare. This trope has been reproduced in various ways; for instance, despite his sympathy for the tribal groups he studied, it is no accident that anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf titled two of his best-known books *The Naked Nagas* and *Himalayan Barbary*.¹⁸ The post-Independence insurgencies in the Northeast, beginning with the Naga armed independence struggle in the 1950s, have added to the stereotype of hill people as being particularly uncivilised and unruly. The public in India seems somewhat oblivious to the situation in Northeast India, accepting the state's centrist position that there is a law and order problem in the region.¹⁹ Recently, a Muslim man who was charged with the rape of a young Naga woman was dragged out of prison and lynched by a mob in Dimapur, the largest town in Nagaland. This tragic event was widely reported in the national media as particularly barbaric, reiterating the portrayal of the Nagas as xenophobic,

15. These are figures from 2010 by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

16. Russel King and Ronald Skeldon, 'Mind the Gap: Integrating Approaches to Internal and International Migration', in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 36, no. 10 (2010), pp. 1619–46.

17. Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); David Mosse, Sanjeev Gupta and Vidya Shah, 'On the Margins of the City: Adivasi Seasonal Labour Migration in Western India', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 40, no. 28 (9 July 2005), pp. 3025–38; Alpa Shah, *In the Shadow of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2010); and Svati P. Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2014). See also the new book on internal migration in India by Deepak K. Mishra (ed.), *Internal Migration in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2016).

18. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas: Head-Hunters of Assam in War and Peace* (London: Methuen and Co., 1939); and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Himalayan Barbary* (London: John Murray, 1955). See also Sanjib Baruah, 'Reading Furer-Haimendorf in North-East India', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 50, no. 14 (4 April 2015).

19. An example of such a state-centric view of Northeast India as a governance problem is the almost canonical book by B. G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996).

narrow-minded tribals.²⁰ Yet, despite this legacy, northeastern youth are now establishing themselves as desirable employees in the private service sector where they have earned a reputation for being hardworking, loyal and proficient.

Guwahati–Thiruvananthapuram Express

Kerala is something of an enigma in India. It is regarded by some as a development success story in terms of progress in welfare, education, health and civil society participation.²¹ Yet, economically, the state has remained rather stagnant and is highly dependent on remittances from expatriate Gulf workers. For anyone visiting Kerala, it is hard not to notice the large number of massive concrete houses scattered throughout the countryside—elegantly painted and with satellite dishes and one or two cars neatly parked outside—built by these migrant workers. Many of these Gulf mansions remain empty because their owners are away, living abroad.²² Furthermore, despite its high scores on social indicators, Kerala has amongst the highest suicide rate in India. This seems difficult to account for: one strand of public reasoning attributes it to a general social and moral breakdown propelled by large-scale migration, with many families living apart, and often with women left with the sole responsibility of caring for children and the elderly.²³ Without necessarily subscribing to these reasons, migration nevertheless does have a darker side, with emotional suffering, loneliness and stress affecting both those who are working abroad and those who stay at home and run the household. Kerala has become a hub of migration, with people going out and others coming in. This larger history, we believe, can be productively juxtaposed to the migration that is unfolding in Northeast India today.

Kerala often figures in discussions about transnational migration, in particular of the many Keralites who travel to work in the Gulf countries.²⁴ That Kerala has subsequently also become an important migrant destination for people from other parts of India has to a large extent passed unnoticed by scholars. We became interested in the situation in Kerala after reading a newspaper article titled ‘North-East Hands Pep Up Kerala Look’,²⁵ which stated that in most of the three thousand hair salons and beauty parlours in the state, the employees come largely from Northeast India. In the article, the owner of Catalyst Saloon & Spa in Thiruvananthapuram confirmed that all her staff comes from the Northeast.

20. Dolly Kikon, *Life and Dignity: Women's Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Dimapur (Nagaland)*, NESRC Monograph Series 1 (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2015).

21. Govindan Parayil (ed.), *Kerala: The Development Experience. Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

22. Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 26–30.

23. While the Gulf migrants are mainly men, there are also women who emigrate. See, for example, George's ethnography of Keralite nurses who have migrated to the USA. Sheba M. George, *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2005). See also Jocelyn Lim Chua, *In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and Suicide in Globalizing South India* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2014).

24. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'I am Gulf: The Production of Cosmopolitanism among the Koyas of Kozhikode, Kerala', in E. Simpson and K. Kresse (eds), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2007).

25. 'North-East Hands Pep Up Kerala Look', *The Asian Age* (1 July 2012) [<http://archive.asianage.com/kochi/north-east-hands-pep-kerala-look-715>, accessed 7 May 2017].

For the northeastern migrants, Kerala offers jobs and a pay scale that is substantially higher than what they could earn at home, but it is a long way from the hills of Manipur, Nagaland or Arunachal Pradesh to Kerala. Most of the northeastern migrants travel by train and getting train tickets is a most arduous endeavour; as well, the journey itself takes at least three to four days. This can be compared to Gulf migrants who travel by air, a journey of four to five hours. During our fieldwork in Kerala, we soon came to realise that the indigenous or tribal migrants we were studying constituted only a small section of the migrant community in the state. We observed that the most attractive place migrants from other parts of India go to is the factory town of Perumbavoor, some forty kilometres from the ancient spice-trading city of Kochi. There, a market known as Gandhi Bazar has grown up around migrants from Bihar, West Bengal and Assam.²⁶ We met several young migrants from Assam and West Bengal who were working in cashew-nut factories—roasting, peeling and cracking nuts that had been imported from faraway countries like Australia and Indonesia²⁷—and others who worked in small-scale rubber factories, fish-packing factories and the construction sector. The migration trajectory of this group is rather different to that of the migrants from the northeastern hill states with whom we are mainly concerned.

English-language skills are critical in determining whether a migrant will be able to enter the better-paid, up-scale service economy or end up in lower-end jobs in construction, manufacturing or agriculture/plantations. Knowledge of English is quite widespread among the northeastern tribal communities, which is a consequence of the education system put in place by Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the missions privileged literacy in the vernacular language, into which the Bible was translated, as well as in English, which was often used as a medium of instruction for other subjects. As historians Joy Pachuau and Willem van Schendel note for Mizoram, missionaries there began their educational efforts in the 1890s, opening the first primary school in 1894 and the first English middle school in 1907, which employed teachers from the Mizo community itself.²⁸ Some parts of Mizoram today have a 98 per cent literacy rate, which is the highest in India. There are high literacy levels and English proficiency in several other of the hill states, not least in Nagaland, where English is the sole official language and the medium of instruction in public schools. This contrasts with other parts of India where knowledge of English is commonly a privilege of the upper middle class or elite groups that can afford education in private English-medium schools. Reena Patel discusses this in her study of the call centre industry in Mumbai and Bengaluru, noting that most of the workers are recruited from the middle- and upper-class strata of society where there are people with the necessary level of fluency in English.²⁹

The other migrants from Northeast India we met in Kerala largely lacked English-language skills and in general seemed to be on a different migratory path compared to the

26. Interview with N. Ajith Kumar, director, Centre for Socio-Economic and Environmental Studies, Kochi, Nov. 2013. The town of Perumbavoor is also known colloquially as Bihar city.

27. See further Lindberg's historical study of the cashew nut industry in Kerala. Anna Lindberg, *Modernization and Effemination in India: Kerala Cashew Workers since 1930* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005).

28. Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel, *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 94.

29. Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 45.

30. Karlsson does not speak Assamese and, for the fieldwork among this group, he depended on the help of an interpreter, Santosh Lama, who worked with him for two months as a translator and field assistant.

indigenous migrants (who were referred to as tribals). The typical trajectory we came across among the former was to work for one or two years in South India in order to earn enough capital to go back home and invest in land or in a small business venture.³⁰ This contrasts with the more complicated or troubled relationship with home we found among the indigenous migrants; despite their attachment to family, village and ethnic group in the hills of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, return home was not the stated goal for the young indigenous migrants. Most said that there is nothing for them to do in the village or small town they come from, so their future lives are envisioned as lying elsewhere. Choro, with his urge to return to Manipur, is hence an exception.

In the case of the non-indigenous migrants, it was mainly young men who were migrating, whereas both sexes were represented in roughly equal numbers among the indigenous migrants. And, finally, if most of the non-indigenous migrants worked as unskilled labourers earning between Rs5,000 and Rs10,000 per month, the English-speaking indigenous migrants usually pursued some kind of skilled or semi-skilled work in the service sector, for example as hairstylists, massage therapists, receptionists, bartenders, security guards or air hostesses, and had a salary ranging between Rs10,000 and Rs20,000 per month or more.³¹

The stark difference between the two categories of migrants encouraged us to explore further if and how what we call 'indigenous migration' might be different from other forms of mobility in the region as well as in India and elsewhere in the world. Numbers seem especially critical: in Northeast India, the hill states have a total population of 1–2 million people, and part of the population consists of small indigenous communities of only a few thousand people, or even fewer in some cases. In such circumstances, every individual who leaves will leave a mark. Mobility is certainly nothing new in these frontier areas; people have always been on the move crossing into territories that today comprise the independent countries of Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Tibet and Bangladesh.³² But the present migratory direction towards India proper, or to the mainland as people in the Northeast commonly put it, as well as the scale and pace of migration among the young in particular, is something new and different to earlier forms of mobility. We explore this point later, but first let us introduce three individuals whose stories capture important aspects of the present migratory moment.³³

Migratory Lives

Nabam

Nabam, aged in his mid twenties, worked long hours as a kitchen hand in a juice bar on the famous beach cliff in Varkala, some fifty kilometres north of Thiruvananthapuram. This was

30. Karlsson does not speak Assamese and, for the fieldwork among this group, he depended on the help of an interpreter, Santosh Lama, who worked with him for two months as a translator and field assistant.

31. One Indian rupee is equal to US\$0.015, so that a monthly salary of Rs10,000 equals US\$150.

32. Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2004). The indigenous hill societies have historically been part of larger polities with large-scale movements of people from the hills to the plains and with trade and religious networks spanning the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. See Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013); and James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

33. The migrants discussed here are all young men. Women are also central to our project and their stories will figure more prominently in other publications.

Nabam's first time outside his home state of Arunachal Pradesh. He had travelled to Kerala with his younger friend, Jina—both belong to the indigenous Nokte community whose main economic activity is shifting cultivation. Their journey had been facilitated by Pradip, a man of many trades from Assam who, now in his early thirties, had been on a migratory course for ten years before eventually ending up in Kerala. The three of them worked in the same cafe: Nabam and Jina struggled backstage in the kitchen, washing dishes and preparing juices, while Pradip, who was fluent in English, was a waiter and socialised with the tourists. They each had their special reason for being in Kerala, but, above all, it was a matter of obtaining an income; none of them had been able to find work at home.

When we met them, the tourist season was in full swing and they had already been working for three months, but they were still waiting for their first payday. The cafe owner kept postponing the payment of the stipulated monthly salary of Rs5,000 (although Pradip received some tips). They had no money and looked rather miserable. Nabam and Jina's hands were cracked and raw from making the very popular pineapple juice and washing dishes for fourteen to fifteen hours a day. They were considering running away during the night, but were afraid of the owner, who had once threatened to throw an employee over the cliff on which the cafe was built. They remained in the hope of receiving at least part of the salary that was due to them.

Nabam told us that he had left home to see something different, to experience something new. His family had moved down from the interior hills and, along with others from their village, they had established a new village in the foothills close to the Assam border, adjacent to a small town and the district headquarters. When we visited Nabam at his home in Arunachal Pradesh a year later, his father explained that the family had wanted to move closer to jobs, schools and hospitals. They still kept their land in their home village and travelled there once in a while, but it was far from roads and took more or less a full day to reach. Nabam was married and had a three-year-old daughter. During our visit, he told us he was getting ready to leave for another stint of work, most probably in Goa, where Pradip knew some people. The three men had eventually managed to get their salary from the cafe owner in Kerala; despite the hardship, it seemed that Nabam considered his first period of work outside Arunachal Pradesh a successful venture.

When we met them in Kerala, Nabam's friend, Jina, had just turned eighteen. He had dropped out of school at class eight when his family could not pay the Rs300 that he needed for books and uniform. He had wanted to continue studying, but eventually decided to try to earn some money so he could open a small shop at home. If he could get the salary they had been promised by the cafe owner, one season in the south would be enough. He was longing for home and worried about how his family was managing without him. His family had *jhum* fields which they worked for themselves.³⁴ They were independent and self-sufficient, only buying a few things like oil and salt at the market. Jina was the youngest and was pampered by his parents and older sisters; 'They all love me much', he told us. He had never experienced such rude and aggressive language as he now faced daily at the cafe. At one of our meetings, as we walked along the beautiful beach watching people swimming and playing, Karlsson asked Nabam and Jina if they had ever been in the sea; they turned to him in disbelief, as if to say 'Why on earth would we do that?'. The sea had apparently no attraction for them; they are people of the hills.

34. *Jhum* is the regional term for shifting or swidden cultivation.

Naiba

Naiba was working as a waiter in a restaurant in Thiruvananthapuram. He belonged to the Konyak Nagas from the Mon district in Nagaland. He had been in Kerala for five years when we met, for the first several years as a student in a theological college, and then staying on to study digital design and IT. He financed his studies by working in the restaurant, where he was provided with food and a room to stay. His father also sent him money every month to cover study expenses. The owner of the restaurant was an old student friend of his father and, as Naiba put it, treated him like a son. Naiba's problem was a shortage of time. He wanted to move on in life, to become 'somebody' and to learn new things, go to new places and meet new people. Earning money for its own sake was not what interested him. Several times he mentioned his friend, Longshaw, as a contrasting example; Longshaw was also working in a restaurant, had learnt Malayalam and had now risen to become a low-level manager, earning quite well, happy with his new life and planning to stay on in Kerala. Naiba, however, was not impressed, telling us that he wanted more from life. At times he had considered taking up his earlier theological studies again and perhaps becoming a missionary and travelling abroad. His father encouraged him to discover new things, but had told him that at thirty he would have to return home and take charge of the family and their property, being the eldest son.

Naiba's father was a retired teacher, and it was obvious that the family was economically quite well-to-do. Naiba had an expensive laptop computer, a new smartphone and was always nicely dressed. When we met him later in his hometown of Mon, he showed us large tracts of land and forest that belonged to his family. When we visited their natal village, it became clear that Naiba was well-respected and had a strong grounding in the community. Yet, he had no plans for an immediate return to Nagaland. Since undertaking his theology studies, he had been active in the Naga Students' Association in Kerala and tried to stay in touch with some of these friends. He showed us some birthday and wedding cards he had designed and told us that he thought this could become a prospective business once he moved back to Mon. A year after we met, he announced on his Facebook page that he had got his first proper job, working for a large IT firm in Thiruvananthapuram. He was full of anticipation and things seemed to be developing in the direction he had hoped for.

Lulin

Lulin was a hairstylist working in one of the new upmarket suburbs of Bengaluru. When we met, he had been there for six years. He was well established, but not really at home, it seemed. Like many others, he had fled Bengaluru during the massive flight, or 'exodus',³⁵ in August 2012, when Muslim organisations had threatened to take revenge on all

35. Dolly Kikon notes how rumours created turmoil across the metropolitan cities. Targetting migrants from Northeast India, threatening social media messages led to an exodus, with thousands of migrants fleeing the cities and returning home. Kikon writes: 'A majority of those who left told reporters that they were going back "home" as they boarded overcrowded trains. Invoking home means several things that range from one's home country to the intimate personal places of security. But the "home" in northeast India they return to, seeking protection and security, has never been a safe place' [<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/home-is-hardly-the-best/article3796017.ece>, accessed 1 Mar. 2017]. This event has become known as the 'exodus'. See, for example, 'Social Media and the India Exodus', BBC News [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-19292572>, accessed 1 Mar. 2017].

northeasterners for the killing of Bangladeshi settlers in Assam by ethnic militias. Lulin had bought an expensive air ticket for himself and a friend to leave because the trains were packed with people desperate to leave. He still suffers from the financial loss brought about by his sudden departure, having had to give up his job and flat in Bengaluru and stay home in Manipur for a month.

Lulin is a Kuki from Manipur. As a child he had experienced the Naga–Kuki ethnic conflict and his elder brother had been killed in the violence. ‘They are horrible people, I still find it hard to be around any Naga’, he told us. He added after a while: ‘This is all so sad, we shouldn’t talk about it’. Lulin’s mother was dead and his father had remarried. His stepmother was close to him, but despite this, he said, he did not have much contact with his family. He kept mentioning that his father failed to understand his situation, and constantly urged him to send money. ‘They live in another world, they have a house and garden and don’t need to buy much’, he said. He contrasted this with his own situation where despite a well-paid job—roughly Rs30,000 a month—he barely had enough for a month. But then, as he repeatedly stated, he also paid all the expenses for his younger sister who was studying to become a nurse. Just the rent for his room was Rs7,000 a month, and ‘when you work in fashion you need to spend money on clothing and appearance’, he said; he had problems with acne, for which he sought various expensive skin treatments. Appearance is everything and Lulin is indeed all style: he has yellow, red and blue dyed hair, and wears perfectly-fitting T-shirts and jeans in the latest style.

Lulin lives in a small flat in an area called Ejepura, sharing a kitchen with six or seven other young men and women from the Northeast, who also work in the beauty or fashion industries. Lulin was not happy with his present job, saying it was not a real challenge for him. He was hoping to join the best hair studio in the city called Bounce Style, which caters to the glamorous elite of film and fashion. His long-term goal, however, was to travel to the West, and he was clearly hoping that we could help him in some way with his passage. Lulin said he always spoke to clients in English and that he had never bothered to learn Kannada or Hindi; English, it seemed, put him in a position equal to or even above his clients. Nevertheless, being Kuki was central to him and his main contact with the community was through the Kuki church; lately, however, the church had split into three separate ones. Lulin was deeply disturbed by this, saying that there was too much politicking in the church. During the week that Karlsson met Lulin in Bengaluru, he often came back to how lonely and precarious life was in the city, saying that there was no one there for him.

‘Stretched Lifeworlds’

What then can we learn from these biographic snippets? Nabam and his young friend, Jina, stand out as the most vulnerable. Their lack of English-language skills prevented their entrance into more lucrative jobs in a higher rank of the global service economy, as was the case with Naiba, Lulin and Choro. For the latter three, migration had proven successful in economic terms, yet their lives seemed riven with tension and unfulfilled expectations and aspirations. Choro wanted to return home, but was not really able to figure out how. Naiba and Lulin, who both were ten years younger, were hoping to move further out in the world. What we found particularly telling, which runs through all these stories, is how deeply entrenched the life back at home is with the new life in the south. It was

Choro's story about the magic stone that first made us think about this. Lulin was haunted by memories of ethnic violence, and he constantly affirmed that he did indeed fulfil his responsibilities towards his family, above all by paying for the education of his younger sister; yet he recognised that his father did not see it that way and instead was disappointed in him. Naiba kept stressing how his IT knowledge could be useful back in Mon, yet he expressed little interest in actually returning to the hills. He could easily slip into a comfortable life as the main heir of a large family estate, but again, his aim was to explore new places and possibilities.

The anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues that migratory culture is haunted by the places or homes left behind. Such hauntedness is not just the ordinary nostalgia for home that might strike anyone far from home, but rather the profound presence of another place in the everyday life of the migrant. Hage describes this as the 'vacillatory lifeworld' of the migratory subject.³⁶ This captures well the essence of the migratory experiences outlined in this paper.

In addition, we found the notion of 'stretching' and 'stretched lifeworlds', developed by Fiona Samuels in her work on internal migration in Zambia, most compelling.³⁷ Samuels writes:

The language of migration conjures up an image of people moving away from home where they belong, and moving to a place where a disjuncture with the life in the previous location occurs... . For Kaonde people, who are the subject of this study, I found a situation in which people's life-worlds consist of different spatial and physical locations. Experiences in these locations can be activated and can exist in succession, or consecutively, but they can also exist at the same time or contemporaneously. Whilst an individual may be located in a specific place, another location continues to play a central role in his/her life.³⁸

To describe how different physical and spatial locations figure in people's everyday lives, Samuels introduces the concept of stretching.³⁹ While it can be said that much of the literature on transnational migration has pointed to how migrants today can pursue a life with one foot in their new country and one in the country of origin—not least through cheap mobile phones, the internet and low-cost airline flights—stretching, it seems, takes us beyond a back-and-forth movement between two fixed nodes, evoking instead a more fluid geography. Samuels holds further that stretching resonates with Kaonde idioms, for example, their claim that Kaonde people never migrate despite their highly mobile existence, moving from the village to the capital Lusaka and other places.⁴⁰

This seems to hold true for the northeastern youth too. As pointed out earlier, while inserting themselves into the emerging global economy of metropolitan India, they are equally emotionally invested in the life of their various communities in the hills. Their places of origin and present locations are not then to be perceived as belonging to two separate worlds, but part of one stretched lifeworld. Thinking through the notion of stretching

36. We take this from a lecture by Ghassan Hage at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, 19 April 2013.

37. We thank Willem van Schendel for suggesting and bringing our attention to the work by Samuels, using the notion of 'stretched lifeworlds'. See Fiona Samuels, "We Kaonde We Don't Migrate": The Stretching of Contemporary Kaonde Life-Worlds between Rural and Urban', unpublished PhD thesis, School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex, 2001.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–5.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

can alert us to aspects that are rendered invisible by the more conventional lexicon of migration that stresses the disruption of social relations. We earlier pointed to the emphasis of border-crossings as a life-changing event that produces the very figure of the migrant; and indeed, crossing borders can be a matter of life and death, although not always and not for all people.⁴¹ We have, in other words, to be attentive to different forms of spatial movement.

Remittance is another key topic in migration studies. Those people who leave in order to find work are often expected to send money back to those in the family who remain at home. In the case of the indigenous migrants, however, money flows both ways: some send money back home, while others need the support of their families to cover the high costs of housing, food and clothing whilst away. A young man from Manipur who Kikon met in Mumbai told her that despite having a job with a private airline that paid Rs15,000 a month, his father had to send him around Rs7,000 extra a month. But, as he put it, he had his sights on better paying jobs that he was hoping his uncle in the United States would help him to get. In fact, many of the young northeasterners in the south we spoke to expressed a desire to go abroad. That was the case with both Naiba and Lulin. Their present location in Thiruvananthapuram and Bengaluru was not an end station, a place of attachment or a new home, but rather a node in an ongoing voyage with no definite destination. They were constantly looking for new and better opportunities, seeking to move on whenever a chance appeared. This was also the case with three women from Mizoram who worked in a spa in a hotel in Kerala, who told us that they hoped to eventually go abroad, perhaps to the Gulf, albeit only through reliable connections.

South India was preferred to the cities of North India, yet many of the northeastern migrants we talked to witnessed almost daily experiences of racial discrimination and, for women, sexual harassment.⁴² They felt vulnerable, constantly reminded that they did not belong there. Yet going home was still not an option for many of the migrants we met in South India. Part of this relates to what anthropologists Stef Jansen and Staffan Lövving describe as a 'struggle for home', a contest over how places are endowed with hope and a sense of possibility.⁴³ Movement, thus, is not seamless travel, but entails conflict, struggle and power asymmetries. There are temporal and spatial limits to how far things can be stretched before they snap.

Conclusion

In this article, we have pointed to some of the daily experiences of vulnerability that indigenous migrants encounter and, at the same time, the new freedom and the aspirations their life away from home seems to engender.

41. Ghassan Hage, 'A Not So Multi-Sited Ethnography of a Not So Imagined Community', in *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 5, no. 4 (2005), p. 469. As Hage puts it: 'it is a mistake to think that if people move across national borders, such a movement will necessarily be the most significant and defining element in their lives'.

42. One of my female interlocutors, who has been a student in Hyderabad for six years, told us that she has to endure sexual harassment on an almost daily basis, commonly approached as if she were a prostitute or open to sexual invitation. For an overview of racial discrimination against people from Northeast India, and especially women, see Northeast India Support Centre & Helpline, *Briefing: North East Migration and Challenges in National Capital Cities* (2011) [<http://www.nehelpline.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NE-Migration-Challenges-Research-Report.pdf>, accessed 7 May 2017].

43. Stef Jansen and Staffan Lövving (eds), 'Introduction', in *Struggles for Home: Violence, Hope and the Movement of People* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009).

Naiba invited Karlsson to meet him in Mon, in Nagaland, where he was staying during a longer break from Thiruvananthapuram. Naiba arranged accommodation for him in a government guest house and took him around the small town, introducing him to several people that they ran into and calling friends over to meet at a cafe. Interestingly, though, he did not introduce Karlsson to his parents, only pointing out where their house was located. He insisted that they go to his family's village instead, which is located one and a half hours from the town. They spent a day walking around the village, having tea with relatives and neighbours and looking at the land that belongs to the family. This, it seemed, was his home. Yet, when talking about his father's expectations of his eventual return and future prospects in Nagaland, it was all about Mon town, which again encompassed his sense of home. Naiba's present life in Kerala seemed to lack emotional attachment to specific places and people. As we read it, he was just passing through Kerala despite the many years he had spent there. This also holds true for the majority of indigenous migrants in South India. It can certainly be the case for migrants more generally, but as we have suggested, the affective and political register of indigeneity—predicated on still-unfolding entanglements with people and the natural world of ancestral lands—seems to prevent attachment to the present place of habitation. This is also why we think it is relevant to further theorise indigenous migration as a particular form of mobility that is rooted in the wake of continuing political change in India. Irrespective of the visions for development and progress that are promoted in order to reconstruct the underdeveloped and militarised societies of India's northeast, the increasing number of indigenous migrants draws our attention towards connections between the labour market, conflict and poverty. This ethnographic essay, therefore, is not solely related to economic marginalisation, but underlines how new meanings and practices are produced for consumers (in neo-liberal India) and service providers (as indigenous migrants). As we have highlighted in this article, the 'otherness'—the alleged barbarousness or unruliness—of these migrants does not disappear, but is articulated in new sites across the country.

Choro seemed besieged by the desire to return to Manipur. He had bought some land in his home village, not to cultivate, nor to live on, but just to hold on to. He had been most successful in the service industry and had acquired the skills and sensibilities necessary to function in the global environment of a luxury hotel, yet he was not at peace with himself. He was haunted by what he had left behind, and return seemed the only way for him to fix a world that had been stretched too far and for too long. Choro's situation speaks to the dilemma we sensed among many indigenous migrants: torn between the desire to move out into the world and responsibilities towards family, community and ancestral lands.

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