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Introduction

> Ours is a century of uprootedness. All over the world, fewer and fewer people live out their lives in the place where they were born.
>
> – Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World*, 1995

In the last decade, the migration of indigenous youths from the uplands of Northeast India to metropolitan cities across India has become one of the most significant social and economic transformations of the region. Since India's independence, the region has captured the limits of India's cultural and political imagination, and its citizens and histories have been refracted through the prism of militarization and an extractive resource regime. In this book, we examine the increasing trend of migration among indigenous youths from Northeast India and illustrate how these movements offer us new insights about the insecurities, desires, and expectations among indigenous citizens in global India.

Until recently, the journey of young indigenous migrants who travel across metropolitan cities in India, constantly looking for new employment possibilities and opportunities, was unthinkable. Indigenous mobility in the highlands of Northeast India was associated with *jhum*[1] at best, and with violent ethnic conflicts at worst. In addition, the imagination of indigenous people as attached to their land to be able to inhabit their culture and history was a powerful one. Therefore, the experiences of indigenous migrants we highlight in this book offer a new trajectory about citizenship, mobility, and indigenous experiences in contemporary India. By interrogating the myth of isolation, insularity, and remoteness that has defined Northeast India, we present the struggles, aspirations, and vulnerabilities of young indigenous migrants who constitute the underbelly of the service industry in global India today. The presence of young indigenous migrants, once

[1] *Jhum* is the regional term for shifting or swidden cultivation.

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regarded as savages, backward, and primitive, and their experiences in this book draws our attention towards new ways of generating a theoretical framework about the everyday experiences of a section of the population previously categorized as 'simple' and 'childlike' and disqualified from having elaborate ideas about serious and sophisticated matters in contemporary India. People from Northeast India have also earlier moved to the Indian mainland to work, for example, as civil servants in various government departments or as soldiers in the Indian army. Yet the large-scale migration of young people we account for here is a different and novel phenomenon.

Background

India's northeastern region consists of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. Before the inclusion of Sikkim in the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 2002, these states were known collectively as the 'Seven Sisters'. In 2011, the total population of the region was about 46 million, out of which the majority, 31.2 million people, lived in Assam, and subsequently, in order of size, Tripura 3.7 million, Meghalaya 3.0 million, Manipur 2.6 million, Nagaland 2.0 million, Arunachal Pradesh 1.4 million, Mizoram 1.1 million, and Sikkim 0.6 million (Census of India 2011). Northeast India is extremely diverse in terms of language, culture, and ethnicity; it includes 101 communities defined as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 114 languages. When we talk about the indigenous peoples in this book, we refer to individuals belonging to the ST communities. Even if some of the larger ST communities in the region, for example, the Bodos, live in the plains of Assam, our main focus is on the indigenous peoples of the less populated hill areas.

Northeast India is surrounded by international borders: China, Nepal, and Bhutan in the north, Bangladesh in the west and south, and Burma (Myanmar) in the east. The region is connected to the Indian 'mainland' through a narrow corridor known as the 'chicken's neck'. Land-based transport of people and goods is hence restricted through the highway and the railway line that pass through this corridor. This, as discussed in great detail elsewhere, makes Northeast India's geopolitical situation rather delicate (Karlsson 2017c).

Since India's independence in 1947, violence and armed conflict have predominantly shaped the relationship between the Indian state and its indigenous population from Northeast India (Baruah 1999; Kikon 2005, 2009a; Bhaumik 2009). Due to the long-drawn-out conflict, the postcolonial state in India perceived indigenous people like the Nagas as violent communities and adopted a colonial trope of primitivism and barbarism to support this colonial construction (IWGIA 1986). This produced, among other things, a hostile situation whereby

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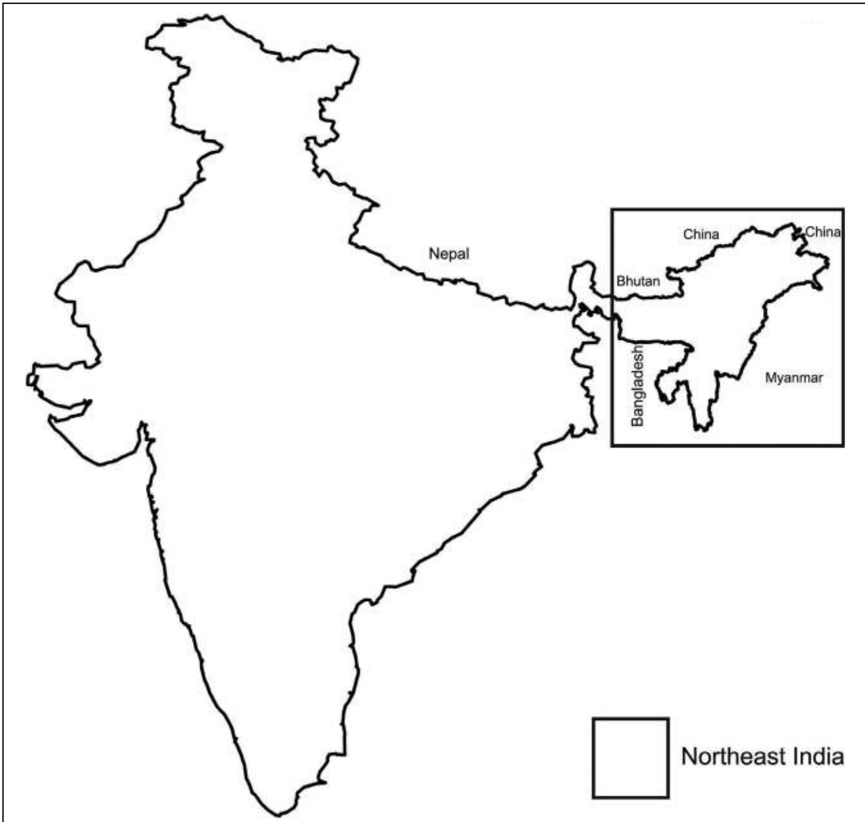
Map I.1 Northeast India



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the citizen–state relationship between indigenous people from Northeast India and the Indian state was framed in oppositional terms as rival parties, leaving behind a long history of extra-judicial killings and violence (Haksar and Luithui 1984; Talukdar, Borpujari and Deka 2009).

However, after the Indian state signed a series of ceasefire agreements with numerous armed groups across Northeast India beginning in 1997, it initiated numerous development programmes and skill-enhancement workshops within a broader programme to usher in peace and generate employment in the region (Kikon 2015a). This period also witnessed an accelerated rate of outmigration from Northeast India to other parts of India, particularly of youth in search of employment and livelihood (McDuie-Ra 2012; Barbora 2016; Bhattacharjee 2016; Singha 2016). According to a 2017 study brought out by the North East

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Support Centre and Helpline, a Delhi-based organization, the outmigration from the region has increased 12 times in the last five years, and over 5 million people from Northeast India are likely to become migrants in the next five years. Who are these migrants and for what purposes do they leave home? The study brought out by the North East Support Centre and Helpline notes that around 66 per cent migrate for educational purposes but less than 5 per cent of them return to their native places, while the remaining 34 per cent leave the region in search of employment (Press Trust of India 2011). One of the biggest employers of indigenous youths who migrate in search of jobs is the hospitality sector, which includes beauty salons, spas, hotels, retail shops, and restaurants.

Yet this trend of internal migration is not limited to migrants from Northeast India alone. In India, according to Abbas and Varma, the 2001 census showed that 19 per cent of the population was internal migrants, which means that they had moved either to the neighbouring districts or states, or long distances across the country for jobs, education, or family reasons. The 2011 census classifies 31 per cent of the population of India as living in urban centres, while the remaining 69 per cent living in rural areas. Given the increasing mobility and movement of people within the country, two out of ten Indians today are categorized as internal migrants (Abbas and Varma 2014). In this context, internal migration is a complex process of permanent, semi-permanent, or seasonal movement regulated by needs of the family, agricultural work, the market, or a combination of factors put together. Given that 69 per cent of India's population continues to live in rural areas, migration literature on indigenous/tribal people classified as Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes (STs/SCs) has predominantly underlined poverty, livelihood, low income from agriculture, and lack of opportunities as reasons for migration (Breman 1996; Roy, Singh and Roy 2015; Haberfeld et al. 1999).

Focusing on internal migration in India, Alpa Shah argues that experiences of tribal migrants in India cannot be solely measured in economic terms. Shah's work on seasonal migrants from the tribal state of Jharkhand in eastern India describes the challenges and encounters of young migrants who work in the brick kilns and highlights the interconnections of culture, citizenship, state, and capital in a rapidly changing tribal society (Shah 2006). As Shah notes, the majority of tribal migrants are categorized as part of the footloose labour force in India. Listing the dominant jobs that tribal migrants carry out in India, Abbas and Varma state that most of them, '… are employed in a few key subsectors including construction, domestic work, textile and brick manufacturing, transportation, mining and quarrying and agriculture' (Abbas and Verma 2014). The high visibility of indigenous migrants from Northeast India as masseurs, waiters, receptionists, and salespersons in big retail stores tells a different story.

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Who are these indigenous migrants from Northeast India? How do they become servers in high-end dining restaurants, pour aromatic oil and massage aching bodies in spas, or work magic with their scissors to give makeovers to customers in salons? What do they say about their world and how do they negotiate their lives as workers in the hospitality industry? How do they express their aspirations and hopes for the future as indigenous peoples? In answering these questions, this book explores how they negotiate the boundaries of being indigenous migrants in metropolitan cities and their status as modern yet inferior citizens in contemporary India. We flip around the complex and often prickly question about belonging, race, and ethnicity. The constant question of who qualifies, or not, to belong in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, or Meghalaya has dominated the debate whenever indigenous migrants from Northeast India report that they have been discriminated against and abused. Dismissing these reports, a counterargument is put forth that people from Northeast India constantly discriminate against migrants from other parts of India who work in the region, including families who are settled in the tribal hill states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. These debates often present polar cases as though there are no points of contact, alliances, or relationships that are forged through various networks. In this book, we resist the binary position of discrimination or assimilation, and offer an ethnographic framework that is creative and addresses the nuances of this complex landscape. The lives of indigenous migrants from Northeast India capture the ordinariness of violence and discrimination that is embodied within citizenship practices in India. We elaborate how the privileges of citizenship beneath the constitutional provisions and rights are marked by culture, class, race, and capital.

The disenfranchised status of indigenous migrants in metropolitan cities is made visible by their everyday struggle to secure basic needs like safe housing, access to government offices, and employment benefits. These deep insecurities play a dominant role in referring to their respective home states such as Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Meghalaya as ‘home’ and defining their places of work as located in ‘India’ or ‘mainland India’. Yet the marker of metropolitan cities as a different national space is produced through a series of connections. For indigenous migrants, their sense of belonging to their villages or towns – places that they might never return to and yet are obligated to retain their ties with – is deeply situated in the distinct experience of living on their ancestral and communal lands. From stories of origin, memories of their ancestors, and current traditional alliances and politics, land is perceived as the reservoir of history and knowledge about these processes. Hence, between the pressure from family members and kin groups to ‘return home’ eventually and take up their responsibility as ‘elders’, and their individual desires to look for opportunities, young indigenous migrants find different ways to interpret the meaning of freedom, care, and labour. In the

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following sections, we highlight the central themes in this book that constitute the experiences of migration and mobility of indigenous migrants in the hospitality industry in global India.

Leaving the Land

Migration is a collective experience. When 18-year-old Huvelu Nienu shared her dream to work in the aviation industry as a cabin crew member, she said, 'I wish to serve people, to help people, and to fly across the world.' Her ultimate destination was Malaysia, a country she had not visited but learned about through Gloriana, a SpiceJet flight attendant from Nepal whom she followed on Instagram. Huvelu's cousin was also part of the cabin crew for an airline. During the course of our fieldwork across metropolitan cities in India, many young migrants from Northeast India described their aspirations to travel, earn, and achieve their dream jobs. Large numbers of young migrants left their home regions where communities had witnessed decades of armed conflict in states like Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, or the structural violence and unemployment crisis in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. The majority of young migrants said that they left to escape the violence and the militarization in their respective homelands and states. One of the consequences of the long-drawn-out armed conflict has been the structural breakdown of the social and economic relations across indigenous communities. The most important transformations that connect with the story of indigenous migration are the changes in land relation and the emergence of rich indigenous landowners. An increasing number of households from the upland indigenous communities are moving away from subsistence agriculture and looking for alternative livelihood opportunities as *jhum* is no longer regarded as a viable source of income to sustain a household. Land is increasingly becoming a valuable asset to speculate for profit, and turn into tea and rubber plantations, or start mono-cropping ventures such as ginger, turmeric, and other commercial crops. These ventures require large sums of investments that are in the hands of powerful and wealthy indigenous families who are connected to important political actors such as political groups, tribal councils, and non-state actors.

In this book, we are concerned with the lives and lifeworlds of indigenous migrants who have travelled from their villages and towns to the metropolitan cities across 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. It is a journey of survival, leaving behind the histories of armed struggles and massive human rights violations and a corrupt local state structure; it is a relocation to an urban hub and

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adapting to a life in major Indian cities where indigenous migrants are seen as outsiders, yet where their un-Indian looks and English-language skills help them obtain jobs in the growing global service sector. The category indigenous migrants in this book is a broad term that refers to people who are categorized by the Indian state as 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. Being indigenous is a new way of placing oneself in the world. It is a political articulation, a way of identifying oneself and claiming rights and recognition as peoples with the right to self-determination and cultural survival. The term has travelled globally and everywhere it is being questioned and discarded as a misnomer and politically malign (Karlsson 2003, 2013; Shah 2010). We take indigenousness to be an empirical reality as a form of identification and political practice in most parts of the world, and so also in South Asia. As we will show then, indigeneity – 'the conditions, theories and values of being indigenous' (Cattelino 2008: 3) – is constitutive to the present migratory moment in the Northeast.

While Northeast India is a landlocked part of the country, many of the youths who enter the hospitality industry hope to join luxury cruise ships and sail the Caribbean Sea, the Florida coast, Australia, or the Arabian Sea. As Lallian Thangsing, who used to work in a five-star hotel in Mumbai, puts it, 'In the spa section all the girls were from Northeast India, and whenever I met any of them, they kept saying, "When will I go to cruise, when will I go to cruise".' Lallian explained that jobs on a cruise ship were better paid in comparison to the spas, and his female colleagues were hoping that they would be able to save a lot of money. But more than that, indigenous migrants were excited about the cruise ship jobs because they took them out in the world. His friends who sought these jobs often said, 'We Northeasterners love to go places.' Muanching Simte from Manipur has been working on an exclusive cruise ship for several years and she similarly stressed that you go to work on cruise ships to earn money and to see the world. She has also been successful on both fronts, travelling to most continents. Muanching loves Japan, especially Osaka, as it is clean, and one of her favourite destinations in Europe is Norway and the spectacular Geirangerfjord with its beautiful waterfall.[2] Before she joined the cruise ship, she worked as an assistant manager in a five-star hotel earning about ₹30,000 a month, whereas she now makes about ₹200,000 a month. With such a salary, she has managed to save a substantial amount, as well as help her family to repair their house in Manipur and buy a plot of land for herself in Guwahati, the largest city in Assam. Despite this, her return seems uncertain.

[2] Geirangerfjord was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005.

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She recently married a man from her community living abroad and they were (in December 2017) planning to move to Canada and settle there.

While it can rightly be argued that people have always been on the move and mobility is the most universal form of human existence, migration has become a massive force of social change reshaping lives locally as well as on a global scale. On a general level, one can say that people migrate to avail themselves of new possibilities elsewhere or to escape hardships like famine, war, or societal collapse. Yet, on the level of particular migrant situations or in the case of individual migrants, things become endlessly complex. Every migrant has his or her own story and hence, reasons to be on the move.

The places that indigenous migrants leave behind often have the characteristics of a resource frontier with extractive resource usage, and overlapping legal regimes that allow for appropriation by state and capital forces. These places are also accompanied by violence and undemocratic governance. The interior indigenous hinterlands have deeply militarized histories with decades of armed conflict situations and lack the modern infrastructure that people desire today. In Arunachal Pradesh, for example, residents leave their interior villages to settle along the highway, leaving *jhum* plots to revert to dense forests (Aisher 2007). Along with this, new migrant communities are renting land or entering into sharecropping arrangements with the indigenous landowners (Harris-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay 2009). A massive construction boom of hydropower projects is also reshaping the entire Arunachal landscape, not only displacing people, destroying unique riverine ecosystems, and giving rise to protest and large-scale resistance but also generating dreams about salaried jobs and development (Ete 2018). Nabam, whom we met as he was washing dishes and making pineapple juice on the Varkala Cliff in Kerala, comes from an interior village that a decade ago had resettled at the outskirts of a small town on the Arunachal Pradesh–Assam border. When we met the family in Arunachal Pradesh, the father explained how they have still kept the land in the village but travelled there sporadically. They shifted to the town to have access to educational centres and health care services, and to seek employment opportunities to make ends meet. This is something that is echoed in stories of indigenous migration elsewhere in the world. It is, for example, estimated that almost 50 per cent of the indigenous peoples of Latin America now live in cities, most of them recent migrants due to the loss of land – pressures from an expanding agricultural frontier as well as mining and other extractive industries – but equally important is people seeking work, education, and health care that are more readily available in metropolitan areas.[3] Even in an iconic wilderness like the

[3] This is based on the findings of a recent World Bank study, *Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade* (Freire et al. 2015).

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Amazonas, scholars are now pointing to a dramatic process of 'indigenous urbanization' (Alexiades and Peluso 2015; McSweeney and Jokisch 2007).

While it is not hard to see why the indigenous youth in particular look for new openings in prosperous urban areas in metropolitan cities, this has significant consequences for the communities back home and for the indigenous societies more generally. When the young are gone, as one of the Northeastern migrants pondered, 'Who will cultivate our land and keep the relations with the ancestors?' But even if people are concerned with family and kin at home, return is rarely a realistic option. There are no jobs back home in their villages and towns, and for that reason most indigenous migrants prolong their stays in the metropolitan cities. This kind of indefinite extension where migrants stretch their plans to return home also changes their views about the world, making it harder for migrants to connect with those that have stayed behind in their villages and towns.

Indigenous Migration

In this book, we examine a particular form of migration that we call 'indigenous migration' (Trujano 2008).[4] By this, we refer to the movement of people who would otherwise be perceived as holding on to their land and livelihoods or being attached to their lands. Here, we propose that there are certain characteristics or distinct features of indigenous migration that motivate linking the prefix 'indigenous' to migration. Hence, we chose to keep it analytically separate from other forms of mobility or migration. We especially focus on the mobility of indigenous youths from India's northeastern resource frontier to megacities like Bengaluru, Mumbai, Thiruvananthapuram, and Hyderabad, and further abroad (Map I.2). The terms 'indigenous youth' and 'resource frontier' are critical here, again indexing something distinct and different that has analytical bearings beyond the mountain tracts of Northeast India. As pointed above, a similar trend of indigenous migration and urbanization has also been noted globally and it is noteworthy that the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues dedicated the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples to this very topic in 2018 (this day is celebrated every year on 9 August).

Indigenous peoples' struggle all over the world centres around questions of self-determination and rights to ancestral territories. But as this quest is unfolding

[4] We borrow the term 'indigenous migration' from an IOM Report by Carlos Yescas Angeles Trujano entitled *Indigenous Routes: A Framework for Understanding Indigenous Migration* (2008). This is the first usage of the term that we have come across. The report is mainly concerned with international or transnational migration of individuals who belong to indigenous peoples, something that the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) earlier had brought attention to.

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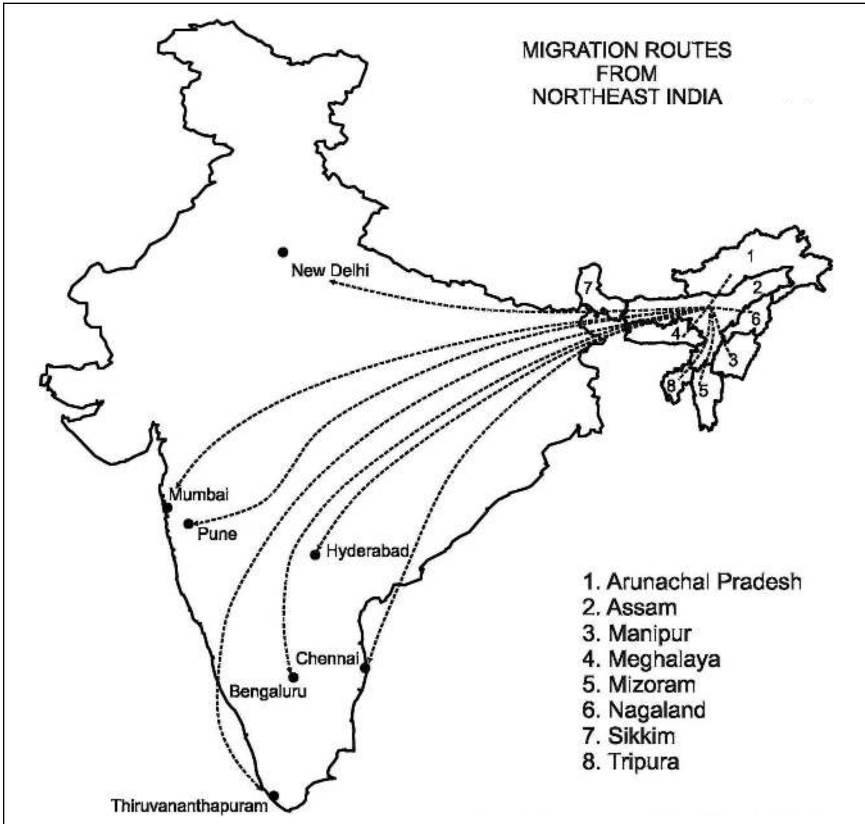
Map I.2 Migration Routes from Northeast India



Note: Map not to scale and does not represent authentic international boundaries.

globally, we also note a strong trend of indigenous peoples leaving their ancestral lands to move into urban centres and metropolitan areas. Across cities as different as Delhi, Stockholm, Sydney, New York, Bangkok, and Dhaka, one finds sizeable communities of indigenous peoples making the city their home. In some instances, these communities have a longer history of dwelling in the city, whereas others are of a much more recent kind. Despite earlier forms of mobility, this book presents a distinct story about leaving the land and the reasons behind the surge of indigenous migration from Northeast India in recent years.

Our time is indeed one of migration and uprootedness. People, as noted, are on the move to escape war, oppression, and general economic and social misery, hoping to start a new life for themselves and their children in another, hopefully better,

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