Dreams and Desserts: Indigenous Migration,
Service, and Mobility in India

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This article focuses on the pathways of indigenous migrants from Northeast India and examines their lives as workers in the hospitality industry. Experiences of indigenous migrants allows us to study emerging trends of indigenous mobility and consumption in India. Indigenous migration from Northeast India is distinct because it is a movement away from a slash-and-burn subsistence agriculture and a sense of belonging determined by ethnic politics focused on autonomous homelands. In addition, experiences of indigenous migrants from the highlands of Northeast India with their un-Indian looks and their English-language skills present them as desirable workers in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: migration, Northeast India, hospitality, indigenous youth, mobility, communication

The 2001 census in India showed that 19% of the population were internal migrants. People increasingly move either to neighboring districts or states or long distances across the country for jobs, education, or family reasons. Today, 31% of the population in India live in urban centers, while the remaining 69% live in rural areas. Given the scale of mobility and movement of people, two out of 10 Indians are categorized as internal migrants (Abbas & Varma, 2014). This article focuses on the experiences of internal migration as experienced by indigenous migrants from the highlands of Northeast India. Internal migration in India can be a complex process of permanent, semipermanent, or seasonal migration regulated by needs of the family, agricultural work, the market, or a combination of factors. Given that 69% of India's population continues to live in the rural areas, migration literature on indigenous/tribal people classified as Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes (ST/SC) have predominantly underlined poverty, livelihood, low income from agriculture, and lack of opportunities as reasons for migration (Breman, 1986; Haberfeld, Menaria, Sahoo, & Vyas, 1999; Roy, Singh, & Roy, 2015).

Alpa Shah (2006) 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 labor force in India. What are the dominant jobs that tribal migrants carry out in India? Abbas and Varma (2014) 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" (p. 1). Yet the experiences of indigenous migrants from Northeast India is distinct. "Indigenous migrants" from the highlands of Northeast India refers to people who are categorized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and self-identify as indigenous to the land. Often, the terms "tribal" and "indigenous" are used interchangeably across the region. After leaving their homes in the militarized uplands of Northeast India, places that have a history of armed conflicts in post-independent India, many of them work as masseurs, waiters, receptionists, and sales persons in big retail stores in metropolitan cities across India. Their lives tell a different story. While, scholars and policy makers understand the mobility and movement of tribal migrants in India as confined within dominant key sectors such as the brick kilns and construction work, in this article I present the pathways of indigenous migrants from Northeast India and underline how they negotiate their mobility as workers in the hospitality industry.

Focusing on the experiences of indigenous migrants as waiters, this article examines mobility and consumption in India. Experiences of indigenous migrants in this article specifically refers to internal migration within the country and does not involve crossing international borders. However, this migration pathway is distinct because it is a movement away from a slash-and-burn subsistence agriculture and a sense of belonging determined by ethnic politics focused on autonomous homelands. In addition, experiences of indigenous migrants from the highlands of Northeast India with their un-Indian looks and their English-language skills presents them as desirable workers in the hospitality industry.

Background

Since India's independence in 1947, violence and armed conflict predominantly shaped the relationship between the Indian state and its indigenous population from Northeast India (Baruah, 1999; Bhaumik, 2009; Kikon, 2005, 2009). Due to the long-drawn conflict, the postcolonial India state adopted the colonial trope of primitivism and barbarism for indigenous people such as the Nagas to perceive them as violent communities and supported this colonial construction (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs Publication, 1986). This produced, among other things, a hostile relationship whereby the citizen–state relationship between indigenous people from Northeast India and the Indian state was framed in oppositional terms, as recalcitrant citizens and a disciplining state. In post-independent India, this antagonistic relationship created a long history of extrajudicial killings and violence (Luithui & Haksar, 1984; Talukdar, Borpujari, & Deka, 2009). In 1997, the Indian state signed a series of ceasefire agreements with numerous armed groups across Northeast India. This ushered a series of development programs and skill enhancement workshops to generate employment across the states of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, including Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura. This period also witnessed an accelerated rate of outmigration from Northeast India to other parts of India (Barbora, 2016; Bhattacharjee, 2016; Singha, 2016). Particularly, youth in search of employment and livelihood arrived in places as far as the southern states of India such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh ("50 Lakh People," 2011).

Today, the largest number of indigenous migrants from the uplands of Northeast India are absorbed in the hospitality sector such as saloons, hotels, retail shops, and restaurants. Drawing from work on experiences of indigenous migrants from Northeast India in urban hubs (Haksar, 2016; McDuie-Ra, 2013) and their encounters with discrimination and racism (Debbarma, 2016; Yengkhom, 2012), I extend the focus of this article from Kikon and Karlsson's (2017) work on migration and mobility in contemporary India. Building on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2013 and 2016 in Dimapur, Delhi, Pune, Trivandrum, and Mumbai, this study contributes toward new ways of thinking about migration, mobility, and identity in contemporary India. The textual arrangements from my fieldwork are accounts that articulate stories of migration as collective experiences of indigenous societies fundamentally undergoing political transformation globally.

Exploring dreams of migrants' families, the first section examines the connections between the ongoing social transformation and the moral world. Here, values, ideals, or virtues described as conducts of indigenous societies cannot guarantee the economic security and success that indigenous migrants and their parents' desire. Reiterating the importance of dreams and its link to social life, anthropologist Michael Heneise shows how the connection between dreams and the interpretative practice of assigning dreams as sources of knowledge and value occupies an important place among the indigenous communities such as the Nagas in the uplands of Northeast India (Heneise, 2017). Thus, dreams among the indigenous families I interviewed represent the formless yet violent realities of becoming cheap labor as migrants in contemporary India. Bringing an ethnographic insight about dreams, I underline how these accounts help us to understand the anxieties and insecurities of indigenous migrants and their families. Thus, when indigenous youth become migrants, it is not an individual experience but a collective one. I examine migration as a moral journey that informs us how mobility powerfully transforms relations within the indigenous family unit and creates new vocabularies of suffering and survival.

Second, I highlight how indigenous migrants in the hospitality sector adopt new behaviors, values, and standards of services. Following conversations about working in fine-dining restaurants, the second section examines how indigenous waiters deploy notions of taste and refinement to describe global customers. But such encounters are captured within the frame of citizenship, race, class, and caste as they emphasize the tensions between Indian customers and indigenous waiters. Michael Lynn's (2006) research shows how racial differences play a role in tipping cultures across the United States. These experiences caution us how the category of the "customer" is not amorphous. As we shall see, the customer is marked by class, caste and do not come across as subjects simply present to enjoy the cosmopolitan and global service in the restaurant.

At any given time, conversations with migrants and their families about experience of mobility and movement became emotional during my fieldwork. They went back and forth between the past, present, and their dreams about the future. Initially, I felt awkward that parents broke down and migrants I met shared intimate stories of heartbreak and their insecurities about their future. I was deeply affected by their stories. I began to wonder in what ways can we understand and recognize the value of such emotional narratives as part of the global experience of political economy and not strip it away as fieldwork ramblings that are devoid of intellectual substance. The everyday experiences of tribal migrants capture what Sara Ahmed (2004) notes as "that emotionality involve(ing) movements or associations whereby 'feelings' take

us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present." Working toward a theory of passion and affect, Ahmed (2004) notes that this process involves "relationships of difference and displacement" whereby its meaning, value, or power are produced and accumulated over a period of time (pp. 119–120). In this article, I apply the concept of emotion and its circulation to understand how indigenous migrants and their families assigned values, and in some cases, valorized and fetishized migration. Indigenous migration, understood this way, is not perceived as a move to accumulate wealth. Instead, it is a pathway to acquire more exposure and become more marketable in the global economy. For indigenous migrants from the uplands of Northeast India, the logic of circulation constitutes in assigning value to their labor in the hospitality sector, while remaining attached to social relations and a past back home.

Experiences of indigenous migrants, some of which I could capture in language and others I have lacked the ability to record and analyze, are important because they allow us to understand new human realities and struggles. Illustrating the importance of analyzing the nightmares and screams of female migrants in China, Pun Ngai (2000) notes that she was provoked to explore whether such moments could "produce a new genre of writing . . . one capable of articulating a personal itinerary into a historical narrative and analysis" (p. 532). In a similar fashion, the relationships—citizenship, mobility, and consumerism—I highlight in this article are established on the backdrop of a history of violence and militarization. Illustrating the accounts of indigenous migrants in this respect means exploring the possibilities of producing a distinct perspective about the ongoing transformations in the lives of these migrants from the highlands of Northeast India. One of the distinct historical experiences from these highlands are encounters of the "Indian state" through the Indian armed forces.

But today, many indigenous migrants say they experience the "Indian state" through the hospitality sector. Here the "face" of the Indian state has shifted from the Indian armed forces to the customer. This captures the lived reality of indigenous migrants from Northeast India who are recognized as "Indian" only when they are promoting or selling consumer products and services in malls, saloons, and the hotel industry. Yet their encounters with state agencies and the larger public, including colleagues, continue to be fraught with anxiety and violence (both physical and structural). Here, indigenous bodies, once marked as barbaric and antinational, undergo a transformation as they become part of the labor force in the hospitality sector. Their ability to adapt as migrants and understand their roles as service providers, as the following sections highlights, captures the ways in which indigenous migrants experience mobility and consumption in global India.

Dreams

"Chuba had returned home. There was a commotion, and something was happening. I was heartbroken. I asked him why he had to come back home. I suddenly woke up and realized that it was only a dream. This is my biggest nightmare." Chuba's mother, Narola, was worried that her son will return to Nagaland. He had left for Mumbai six months ago to wait tables in a restaurant. Since her son left home, nightmares of his return began to haunt her. These dreams, which she called *beya sopon,* or bad dreams, in Nagamese, came up in numerous conversations with families of Naga migrants. Discussing dreams, I found myself wondering how dreams of returning could be categorized as a nightmare. I sensed that she

missed her son, yet her conviction that places elsewhere—far away from Nagaland—were safer and better, became evident. During the course of my fieldwork, several families shared stories about siblings, children, or relatives who were migrant workers in metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, and Trivandrum, and emphasized that they should make their lives away from home.

Narola's dreams about her son Chuba allowed me to explore experiences of migration among indigenous communities from the uplands of Northeast India. Accounts of insomnia, anxiety, fear, and difficulty in communicating with their migrant household members surfaced. Bad mobile network connections in the rural areas and long working hours disrupted communication. I realized that thousands of families were experiencing migration and mobility in powerful ways. In Nagaland, the number of youth leaving the state as migrants has increased in the last decade. The experience of return, for many, was characterized as a humiliation. The moral values attached to mobility and migration as a way of exploring the world was immense. Yet once a family member became a migrant, the process radically transformed the lives of those who had departed and the ones who stayed back as well. For example, Moala, a mother of a migrant from Dimapur, described how her daughter Asangla cried when she left Nagaland. Describing the experience, she said, "My daughter cried till Bihar," and continued, "she called me every time the train entered a new state. The phone call started in Assam, and then it became routine as she crossed West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, before finally arriving in New Delhi." Moala said it was only when the train entered Uttar Pradesh that Asangla was excited about her future. Here, the sorrow of leaving home is not measured solely by the geographical distance, but through the various emotions and moods as well. In a similar manner, the process of settling down for new migrants in metropolitan cities meant getting accustomed to the long working hours at their workplace. Particularly, families of migrants in Northeast India shared that their sons and daughter who worked in the hospitality industry in cities such as Mumbai and New Delhi or Trivandrum were initially uncertain about communicating with them. Eventually, they adjusted their sleeping hours according to the timings of the restaurants and the breaks allotted to their children. Aging parents slept late so that they could speak to their children before going to bed. Many families were aware of the hardship and struggles that migrants faced. Thus, they referred to cities as places of suffering although they had not visited them. Where did they get these impressions? Many vignettes and details about Indian cities which families shared with me were often recreated from phone conversations.

Narola said, "Some say city life is good and fun, and others say, Ah! See, even if you live in a city, there is suffering." When I enquired her impression about Mumbai, the city where her son worked as a waiter in a fine-dining Italian restaurant, she replied, "How do I imagine Mumbai to be? Only my son comes to my mind when I think of that city—if he is okay, if he is safe, if he can carry on with his work. If he gets a good job one day, I want to go there. At least once in my life I hope to visit that city." Narola described the personality of her son as someone "who did many things without succeeding in anything." This was a dominant account of the youth in Nagaland. Given the declining number of jobs and avenues for young people to find employment, many of them sought opportunities outside the region. Chuba left for Mumbai with 40 other migrants from Nagaland in 2015. This experience sounded similar to other parts of India. Describing the struggles of the educated unemployed youth in Meerut, Craig Jeffrey (2010) describes what he calls "cultures of limbo," a state where the youth aimlessly wait and linger as a consequence of the political and economic uncertainty in contemporary India. Narola's description of her son as someone who drifted from one project to the next was typical of the educated unemployed youth in Northeast India as

well. Her desperation to send her son away from Nagaland was shaped by the social and political environment in the state where unemployed youth were perceived as failure in life. In addition, the dangers about the threat to life among the youth due to armed conflict added a layer of fear to the prevailing insecurities of unemployment that Jeffrey highlights in his work. Over the decades, the scale of counterinsurgency operations predominantly targeted the youth (Kikon, 2017). Able-bodied young men and women were profiled either as insurgents or prospective candidates that would be recruited as insurgents or political mobilizers. The reaction of the Indian security forces was to pick up the youth and interrogate them. Indigenous migrants like Chuba, who were becoming visible in the hospitality sector, were the products of militarization, violence, and a conflict economy. Many decades of armed conflict gave rise to a disproportionate distribution of resources and wealth in the hands of few politicians, technocrats, and military organizations, including state and non-state actors.

Being clear that Chuba had no opportunity in Nagaland, her mother reminded him to "adjust all the time." What kinds of adjustments did it take to work in a fine-dining Italian restaurant in Mumbai? According to Narola, there was a constant flow of "foreigners and wealthy Indian customers," and her son was the first person to arrive and the last person to leave the restaurant. The connection between time and migration is an important one. Studies on migration refer to the issue of time to capture different experiences of the migrant's life, ranging from their travels, processes of immigration, subjective expectations, working conditions, all the way to assessing their ability to become financially independent. Focusing on the theme of time and migration, Saulo Cwerner (2001) suggests that the temporal dimension of time and migration captures the importance of time in the lives of migrants that range from understanding migration as a process all the way to the legal and political aspects that are integral in the lives of international immigrants. Although Cwerner refers to cases of international migration where immigrants assess their status in the host countries, his work resonates with the temporal experiences of Narola and her son Chuba. For Cwerner, time and migration is "a phenomenon intimately associated with *space*, more precisely as a process unfolding *in* space" (p. 7). In the case of indigenous migration, the temporal aspect is an integral part of the experience. As Narola's accounts revealed, the long working shifts and expectations of the employers transformed her ways of communicating with her son. Marked by "working hours" and "shifts," the working conditions in Chuba's restaurant meant that his mother only called him "during resting time." These were brief conversations, and as a result were erratic and fragmented. However, Narola dreamed of him regularly, and she narrated one of her recent dream about Chuba as follows:

> I had a bad dream again. We were having a conversation, and he told me he wanted to return to Nagaland. I told him why should you return? No, don't come back. If you return, you will just linger here like a mad man without doing anything. Your mom and dad cannot afford to send you off again. Since we were able to send you out once, you have to do something with your life.

> After this dream, whenever I called Chuba he did not pick up his phone. Finally, I got through to him so I asked him, "What happened?! What happened?" He told me that some nights ago he got mugged. It happened like this. After he got off from work late that particular night and returned home, there was no rice to cook dinner, so he went looking for a store to buy rice. When he stopped by and asked a group of youth standing on the road for

direction, they took away his wallet. It contained his identity card, driving license, pan card, and ATM cards.

He started crying over the phone and said he wanted to come back home. I told him not to cry because he was unharmed at least. Then we locked his ATM card. We told him to be cautious. The following day, his colleagues at the restaurant contributed some money and gave it to him. When his manager learned what had happened, he gave 2,000 rupees to Chuba. I told him that God is with him.

The anxieties of migration are real. Arriving in new cities and towns for work requires furnishing proper documentation. Given the diversity and size of a big country like India, the process of authenticating documents and identity often touches upon issues of citizenship and the diverse ways of asserting one's belonging their respective places. Initially, many indigenous migrants from the uplands of Northeast India arrived in the city with reference letters and papers from their local church pastors or village headmen, and not the required official identity cards, such as ration cards and other valid documents issued by government offices.

Therefore, recruitment agencies such as The People Channel and other human resource agencies in Nagaland made it mandatory for prospective migrants to obtain national documents such as passports, voter identity cards, and driver's licenses. These documents provided the security and safety that was required for migrants in the city, yet documents had their limits. Over the years, cases of racial attacks on indigenous migrants from Northeast India from Indian mobs have increased. According to Nilanjana Bhowmick (2014), their East Asian features encouraged Indian mobs across metropolitan cities to racially harass and bully indigenous migrants, at times leading to death and brutal violence. For instance, reporting on the 2014 murder of a student from Northeast India named Nido Tania in New Delhi, Bhowmick reports that it was "his east Asian features that marked him out for attack and his death highlighted the racism". She notes that, "casual racism" is common in India (Bhowmick, 2014). Yet it is this racial distinction of indigenous migrants from Northeast India that is considered as an asset to sell a global taste and communicate a distinct "Asian" experience when it comes to consumption and service. Therefore, the presence and role of indigenous migrants highlights how a visual racial regime is integral in communicating consumerism and consumption in the Indian hospitality sector.

Desserts

I stumbled on Japanese desserts accidentally. During a discussion about global cuisine with a Naga migrant who worked in a high-end Japanese restaurant in Mumbai, it became apparent that the world of consumption, particularly food and taste, in the fine-dining world focused on a hierarchy of invigorating the senses. The pleasure of taste began long before the food was consumed. Among other things, by aesthetically presenting the food and service, both the server and the customer performed their respective functions—the server, the knowledge of the food being served; the customer, the authoritative consumer. The experiences of indigenous migrants who worked as waiters in the hospitality sector captured this trend of consumption and taste. What was deemed appetizing was not simply the food, but the process of packaging the experience as a "global" one in contemporary India.

The social and political world of indigenous migrants from Northeast India—like armed conflict, militarization, and poverty—disrupted the accounts about acquiring taste and exposed the underbelly of fine-dining experiences. Meetings and conversations with migrants who worked in fine-dining restaurants spoke about long working hours or about their aspirations to move on and find some other work that paid them enough. These everyday experiences, like the challenges of finding affordable housing in the city, saving for the future, or the failure to find a satisfactory job back home, were harsh realities. In the past decade, the focus on employability and skill training have become an important agenda in Northeast India. For tribal states like Nagaland, there is a growing emphasis for training and employment to address the unemployment crisis and the lack of opportunities. *Morung Express*, a leading newspaper in Nagaland, reports that the growing number of unemployed youth has led to an economic and social crisis ("Nagaland State," 2016). To address this issue, state officials and politicians have underlined two categories of unemployment. The first is the uneducated and unemployed youth who are unskilled, while the second constitutes the educated and unemployed youth who lack the skills or training to be "gainfully employed" ("Hand of Applause," 2016, p. 1). In this context, conversation about Japanese dessert in Mumbai offers a critical lens to examine how the world of taste, aesthetics, and high-end dining are on a framework of preparing the future generation of indigenous people to become migrant workers. As we spoke about consumption and taste in fine-dining restaurants around Mumbai, our conversation often oscillated between the villages, towns, and the city.

For instance, John, the young waiter who became my interlocutor about Japanese dessert and taste, told me, "Going home is like becoming a preacher. I have to explain to my family and friends in the village everything. They are constantly asking me about Mumbai." He described how he bought different kinds of food and gifts for his friends and family to let them, "taste the city." John worked in a Japanese high-end dining restaurant called Yuuka at the Palladium, a luxury five-star hotel in Mumbai. Described as an award-winning Japanese restaurant, I noticed how experiences of waiters like John captured the social hierarchies and the underworld of consumption and high-end dining experiences. Besides local employees from Mumbai, the kitchen workforce comprised Assamese, Naga, and Nepali workers, while the chef was from the Philippines. The work schedule was anything but extraordinary. The restaurant opened at 11 a.m. for lunch. From 3–7 p.m. the employees took their break. Some of them slept on the bunkers in the staff units, while others hung out in the shopping malls and cafes. The restaurant opened at 7 p.m. for dinner and closed at 12 a.m. Besides explaining the strict work schedule, John described the menu of the restaurant and his commitment to learn the names of Japanese dishes. While describing one of the restaurant favorite dishes called Yuuka scallop maki, he paused and said, "Maki means 'roll' in Japanese." The avocado tartare was the signature dessert of the restaurant.

"What kinds of customers come here?" I casually asked him. "Someone with a developed taste for food and wine, which they have acquired by extensively traveling all over the world," John responded. This answer provides a significant insight about the cultures of consumption and taste through the eyes of waiters and those who are trained to become servers in India. This temporal dimension of consumerism, where customers come to savor the experience of an edible globalism after extensively traveling around the world, also transformed and shaped their own desires to get "out there." The process of serving and consuming global food like Japanese desserts produced different sensibilities and accounts of value for many indigenous waiters.

It came as a surprise when John commented, "Who pays so much money to eat dessert?" as he showed me numerous pictures of Japanese desserts on his mobile phone. Serving expensive Japanese food and desserts to famous customers like Karan Johar (a famous Indian Bollywood producer), he was aware of the bewildering amount of money customers spent to eat in the restaurant. Calling it an "art on the plate," a food magazine in India described the aesthetics and taste of the food item as follows:

> The tartare, crested with parsnip crisps and somen noodle tempura in a shape evocative of the sakura tree is served on a thin ice sheet that ingeniously holds beneath itself a layer of corn dashi. The server, after Presentation of the dish, cracks open the ice sheet to mix the tartare and the dashi. The result is an explosion of complex flavours and textures. ("Avocado Tartare," 2016)

Contrary to the sophisticated food review that compared the dessert as "an explosion of complex flavours," for John, the avocado tartare was expensive and priced at 1,660 rupees. Clearly, such comments were made not because John was uneducated about the process of preparing the dessert. Describing the philosophy of taste, Denise Gigante (2005) noted a similar phenomenon where consumption and taste is grounded in "the power of metaphor" (p. 3). By this, Gigante meant that taste is not something that can be grounded merely as an appetite located and experienced bodily, but one that is deeply influenced by a consumer culture which includes material desires. John's reaction about Japanese dessert can be read as a way of communicating the experiences of appreciating food and the high-end dining culture. This conversation about Japanese dessert allows us to have a deeper insight about communicating consumption experiences in India.

In this context, what is considered as a pleasurable experience or a distasteful one is bound up with experiences of class and social consciousness. Not all dining experiences turned out as a pleasant experience. For example, John told me how there were some "incidents" on Valentine's Day (in 2015). The first incident was a fight that broke out between a couple. The table had a lavish Japanese spread, but the couple left without touching the food. The second incident involved a young couple who had fallen short of money to pay the bill. "They were very embarrassed and frightened," John said. Clearly, the medium of dining and consumption captured the power of food to connect the world of relations, taste, and emotions. Many social gatherings and events for these migrants included food. In that sense, food constituted an important part of their leisure time and bonding with one another, but it was not Japanese food they were drawn toward.

When I sought an appointment to meet a young waiter who worked in the "continental food" section of a five-star restaurant, he took me out for lunch to a Naga restaurant in Kalina called King Chilli. This restaurant served fermented soy beans, bamboo shoots, and included varieties of herbs and spices in the dishes. Many indigenous migrants kept packets of pickled meat or stocks of dried bamboo, yam cake, and fermented fish from home. "Having fun" during weekends meant cooking the various indigenous dishes in their small flats and having prolonged conversations about seeking more lucrative employment and moving overseas to cities like Singapore, Dubai, and beyond. These conversations also ignited memories about home and the political crisis that limited their opportunities and future. There was something about cooking

and eating together that seemed to ground them in Mumbai and give them the assurance to carry their dreams beyond the shores of this city.

Writing about the eating cultures of "foodies" in Melbourne, Isabelle de Solier (2013, p. 58) describes how consumption is driven by conceptions of moralities about value, taste, quality, and social status. She defines the omnivore foodie in her study as a "moral self" because foodies love of food extends to all types of food, and their sense of the self and taste is expressed through flavor and not politics, like vegetarians or vegans. John's experiences show us there is a contrast between distinct memory acquiring taste and negotiating the moral self. The world of consumption operates as the source of understanding social identity, aspiration, hierarchies, and dreams for the future. Often, it was the disenchantment with their current working conditions that pushed indigenous migrants to seek out new jobs and acquire additional skills and qualifications, a process they believed would help them to move on in life. When understood in this manner, it is consumption and better employment opportunities that draws indigenous migrants all the way from militarized societies in Northeast India to the cosmopolitan hubs of Mumbai. Many indigenous waiters said that cultivating an image that would resonate with the core value and symbols of high-end dining experience became an important part of their identity. Keeping up with this particular "appearance" was extremely important. John identified his job not solely through the food menu and his role as a server. He also paid attention to maintain his appearance. He explained the logic behind this as follows:

> Body language, confidence, hygiene, all matter because we are selling a package. See, looks matter in this business. It is just like a shopping mall (referring to the restaurant). We have to sell the food and its dressing too. It took me two months to learn the menu and memorize the ingredients before I was allowed to serve the customers. Back home the concept of restaurant is dirty and low class. Although I know the menu, I have to wear clean clothes and look good to serve the food.

Stories about home and families always became a way to distinguish the different experiences of food and lifestyle. This created a distinct story about his life in his village. He never revealed that his work was waiting on tables and serving in a restaurant. Unlike his friends who were all married and were subsistence farmers, he was still a bachelor. But that was not the only reason why he stood out. When he went to the village recently (in 2015) John said, "People did not recognize me. I looked fairer than all the rest. They think I work in a security agency. They look at my uniform (a black shirt and trousers) and the earpiece around my head. The picture reminds them of an Indian armed force officer back home." The focus on appearance as a waiter came up constantly during my fieldwork and highlighted how indigenous waiters constituted an inherent part of producing taste and sensibility of cosmopolitan consumers in contemporary India. The visibility of indigenous migrants as waiters in Asian or high-end restaurants where they served "global" cuisines led to a coalescing of what constituted Indian-ness and Indian food as opposed to global food. I am taking the term "global" in this context from conversations with servers and their colleagues who used the terms "global" and "world" interchangeably. These references came up during discussions when they explained how different cuisines such as Japanese, Thai, Continental, or Italian were all presented together as "global" so that the customers had a choice to try out different types of food from around the world.

John's reaction toward desserts, Japanese food, and excellent service resonated with what Aihwa Ong (1999) called flexible citizenship. For Ong, citizenship underwent a transformation in neoliberal globalization. Flexible citizenship in this context meant the ways in which professionals including migrants cultivated a flexible approach to strategize the choices they made about their lives in the backdrop of a global market dictated by a neoliberal state. That John could not bring himself to develop a taste for Japanese desserts but learned to professionally invest his time and effort in selling them marked his strategies to be flexible and acquire the skills to strategically navigate the world of consumption and market.

This flexibility could also be read as self-regulation or self-formation. Ways of experiencing, identifying, and belonging as a citizen between the server and the customer is constantly mediated and performed through consumption in the fine-dining experience. Offering a distinct international and luxurious experience, the social realities of racism, violence, and discrimination toward indigenous migrants from the highlands of Northeast India cease to matter. Instead, the physical characteristic of indigenous migrants serving an international culinary experience to cosmopolitan Indian customers accentuates and enhances the taste of food. The Japanese desserts had well-defined names and identified with Japanese culture in the menu, but what remained fluid was the identity of the indigenous waiters and the racial politics and expressions that reified the existing social and political hierarchies and boundaries in contemporary India. Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed how indigenous migrants were assigned to the world cuisine or to the special restaurants that focused on Asian food.

Maintaining the racial distinction and working on their appearances became a strategy to gain employment. Many of them worked in the hospitality sector such as in spas, saloons, hotels, and restaurants across metropolitan India and emphasized how they spent considerable amount of money and time in maintaining their appearance and hygiene (haircuts, manicures, makeup) and understanding the importance of presentation in cultures of consumption. But the shelf life of this desirable labor was brief. Anthropologist Bengt Karlsson and my work (Karlsson & Kikon, 2017) on indigenous migration highlights how prospective migrants are trained and groomed to become waiters in the hospitality industry, but the long working hours have immense health implications. Waiters told us about back pain from wearing heels constantly, fainting from heatstroke, and developing skin problems and suffering from depression due to long shifts. To negotiate these harsh working conditions and to "develop a more inclusive sense of self," indigenous waiters employed a "pragmatic engagement with the global flow of power and capital (Karlsson & Kikon, 2017, p. 5). Among other things, this meant that they constantly enhanced their skills and found ways to remain employable. Therefore, John's skills about food safety, customer care, and hygiene showed that he was knowledgeable about his responsibilities and the expectations of working in this high-end dining place. Yet underneath the professional aura and flexible approach toward devoting his time to work, his comments about desserts as a foreign food opened up a world of connections where food and consumption became charged with feelings of alienation and experiences of inequality.

Conclusion

This ethnographic article provided an account about indigenous migrants who work in fine-dining restaurants in Mumbai. Instead of reducing their lives to being waiters and migrants, I illustrated how mobility and consumerism shaped and transformed the sociopolitical world of the migrants and their

families, and the various strategies they negotiated in the existing hierarchies and relations of their profession. In the past two decades, indigenous migrants and their families have experienced poverty, unemployment, and suffered a militarized system across the uplands of Northeast India. Thus, indigenous migration is a collective experience. As indigenous migrants negotiate the uncertain economic opportunities in the hospitality sector, their affinities and relationships undergo a transformation. Whether it was families in the village and towns worrying about their future, anxious parents who dreamed of their children's well-being, or the alluring world of "global" customers, these experiences illustrate how migration plays a central role in generating new meanings of suffering and new ways of communicating future aspirations among indigenous communities. For instance, the changes in sleeping pattern in migrants' households in the villages or the recurring nightmares of parents I discussed in this article underlines the temporal experiences of migration in indigenous societies across the uplands of Northeast India. By exploring the everyday lives of indigenous waiters, this article highlighted how cultures of consumption significantly shape migration and mobility. In conclusion, dreams and desserts highlight the fundamental transformation among indigenous communities as increasing number of the younger generation become migrants. These developments, as migration becomes a primary avenue of survival and livelihood, draw our attention toward the connection between the state, the vulnerable labor force, and the market in neoliberal India. The emerging culture of consumption, communication, and mobility, seen from the eyes of indigenous migrants, reifies the existing hierarchies of caste, class, and race in India.

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