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## In Transit: The Making of Urban Migrants in India

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### Abstract

The neo-liberal transformation of India was aided by the restructuring processes launched by the SAP in 1991 and brought the open market to the centre of economic imagination for new India. As the Indian economy opened up to the global financial capital systems and the private sector expanded, a large proportion of labour was relocated to the private, unorganized sector in India. This sector swallowed a majority of the migrant population that was flowing into the urban centers of India. The “middle class aspirations” that the migrants to the cities harbored materialize as a part of the larger neo-liberal aspiration of being upwardly mobile and living a ‘good life’. Based on an ethnographic study conducted in two phases, this paper accounts the narratives of men and women migrants who are employed in the various service sector units of two shopping malls in the city of New Delhi. This paper maps the diversity in the migrant experience by comparing the experiences of two distinct groups of migrants employed in these sectors in India- the indigenous migrants from North East India and the migrants from the rural hinterlands of North India. By comparing the narratives of two groups of migrants my paper tries to argue that in addition to education and credentials, classifications of caste, community and ethnicity play an important role in determining ‘life chances’ and employment opportunities for migrants in urban India.

**Keywords:** Urban Migrants; neo-liberal spaces; indigenous migrants; service economy; comparative study

### Introduction

The neo-liberal transformation of India was aided by the restructuring processes launched in 1991, where the Indian economy opened up to the global financial capital systems. With the restructuring of the Indian economy there were changes at multiple levels. The sovereign role of the state itself was transformed. The market economy became central in the imagination of a new India. The rationality of the market economy was based on ideas of private property and an entrepreneurial logic of self maximization. The ethic of neoliberalism was able to construct and interpellate individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. To top it all there was a construction of a new public discourse that privileged the idea of

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consumption and a 'good life', which fed into the creation of a new normative- i.e. the normative of the aspirational men and women. These aspirations are played out in distinct neoliberal spaces of consumption, one such space is the shopping mall. Joyce (2007) had identified that shopping malls were distinct from traditional market systems or Bazaars in India. Malls became the symbolic representations of a new India with multi-storeyed structures having multiple retail shops arranged one after the other marked by restrictions and monitoring where human interaction is orchestrated in particular customer- client logic. With the construction of the first shopping mall in the capital city of New Delhi in the 1990's, the future of the modern market economy and organisation of labour changed in India as more and more labour began to be employed in the service economy and the retail economy took off. Although the private sector expanded in India, employment practices remained largely informal and a large proportion of labour was relocated in the private unorganized sector.

Based on an ethnographic study conducted in two parts between 2018-2019 and in 2021, this paper takes account of the narratives of two cohorts of migrants who are employed in the varied retail, food and other service sector units of two of the largest shopping malls in the city of Delhi. My paper maps the diversity in the migrant experience by comparing the experiences of two distinct groups of migrants employed in similar sectors- the first group of migrants studied are the indigenous migrants from North east India and the second, belonging to the rural hinterlands of North India. By comparing the narratives of both these sets of migrants my paper tries to argue that in addition to education and credentials, classifications of caste, community and ethnicity play an important role in determining the distinct nature of the migrant experience in urban India.

### **Migration to Neo-Liberal Spaces**

It is important to reconsider and deepen the understanding of the migrant labour experience in India by unpacking the experiences of different sets of migrants employed in the neoliberal spaces of India and understand the structures of inequalities that are generated by these neo-liberal spaces. Zooming in on the migrant labour experience also reveals the intersectional nature of precarity that individuals face in the neo-liberal economy in India. At the same time it is important to probe whether the caste, community and ethnic networks among the migrants have grown thicker post the migrant crisis caused by the pandemic in India.

Migration to urban centers in India is not a new development. Migration can essentially be classified as spatial mobility but it also acts as a conduit for socio-economic 'mobility of individual and groups' (Vakulabharanam, 2016). The expected outcome of migration is inadvertently the desire to expand the economic outcomes and expand the aspirations of those who migrate, largely categorizing migration as an inevitable and beneficial social process. Evidence such as the National Sample Survey data from the 1992-93 and 1999-2000 has suggested that there have been a steady rise in the mobility of individuals in India during these decades and is likely continue to grow in the future (Srivastava and Sasikumar 2003).

Regional variation in income and opportunity had increased in the post liberalization period which has increased the propensity for internal migration in India. Studies have shown that the structural push for migration has influenced labour flows from rural to urban centers in India for employment and economic factors (Mishra, 2016). Due to structures of uneven development between regions in India there have been flows of movement from less developed regions to developed metropolitan centers, which integrates individuals and



regions into channels of global capitalism (ibid). This flow of individuals from one end of the rural economy to be incorporated into a global capital circuits is not just limited to specific households but are defined by distinct structural factors that are varied across regional contexts. One sector that absorbs this huge flow of labor into the urban centers is the urban informal sector. The informal sector enterprises finds itself as a major employer and has been shaping and reshaping the post liberal economy in India. Migration into these informal sectors is defined by the diverse social networks which are constantly at play. More often than not, in addition to lack of economic resources, aspirations for a better future, forced migration and pre-existing family and associational ties act as security network that facilitates the process of migration to the metropolitan cities. Studies have shown how caste, ethnic, religion and language based networks augment realities of migrant workers in the urban centers (Singh 2014, Rao 2014, Kipgen & Panda 2019). Although studies have shown that migrants experience similar conditions and affects as a result of migration however what needs elucidation is how the migrant experience for different sets if migrants might be distinct in a neo-liberal workspace.

### **Contextualising Neo-Liberal India**

The scenario of contemporary urban India is represented with images of high rise apartments, recreational centers, shopping complexes being occupied by educated urban professionals with secured employment, families with steady income who are the primary consumers of luxury goods and services. This is the trope of the urban middle class in India which is promulgated by the media in the television advertisements, in movies, daily soaps and serials. The influence of a middle class imagination is so strong that the aspiration to be a part of the middle class is becoming the norm in contemporary India. This precedence of middle class imagination can be traced back to the time period of the 1990's which changed the reality of India as we know it today. By the 1970s, a deep sense of dissatisfaction had developed amongst different sections of the people as the Indian state increasingly failed to live up to its expectations. By the late 1980's India's economy was running on a large fiscal deficit, which led to the balance of payment crisis<sup>2</sup>. Loans from the International Monetary Fund were taken with accompanying prescriptions for structural adjustment policies. This led to Indian state formally shifting its broad economic policy towards opening up of the economy, a process widely known as liberalization. The move towards economic liberalism was more than just a change in economic policy. It had a broader cultural and political significance. The new consumption oriented market economy took shape and the wave of Globalization that followed these structural adjustments in the economy of India was responsible for changing the character of India's political economy altogether (Brown 2003, Fernandez 2006).

The restructuring of the economy brought certain changes in the way Indian society was structured. There were changes in the forms of labor organization and production. The economy underwent a massive transformation structurally. For instance India's tertiary or service sector grew steadily since the reforms as compared to the agriculture and secondary sectors. This implied that more and more people were becoming employed in services, which indicated an expanding prosperous class of people (Brown, 2003). There was a construction of new public discourse that privileged the idea of consumption and the good life, a creation

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<sup>2</sup> Balance of Payment crisis- By 1980's India was burdened with rising fiscal deficits, which propelled the decline of the country's foreign exchange that led to the Balance of Payment crisis in 1991.

of what can be termed as the new normative Indian man and woman, that every individual aspired to be (ibid). These aspirations are rooted in a neo-liberal imagination oriented towards a consumer public and to cater to this category of consumers, new consumer spaces have erupted in many urban centres of India. These consumer spaces are located physically within India but often resemble westernised global spaces. This neoliberal economy has pushed for the formation of spaces that are distinctively consumption oriented- shopping malls, cafeterias and restaurants that generate a style of consumption that is of distinct upwardly mobile orientation. Consumption itself has become an activity of pleasure and the aesthetics of consumption rests on the ability to know *how* to consume more than *what* is being consumed. The urban centers were painted as the poster child of a ‘liberalizing India’ that boasted of glitzy shopping malls, high rise apartments and theme parks which has become the new norm for development and progress in India. Liberalization had also opened up the Indian market to foreign businesses which have been the provider of lucrative opportunities to the educated youth. The private sector emerged as a fertile platform to take forward their aspirations urban, educated youth. The individuals who were a part of this liberalizing economy were aspiring, creative individuals. In this sense, the neo-liberal market economy was painted as an open market system, devoid of any associations to old caste and community appendages. The neo-liberal market was supposed to open up the economy and provide opportunities for everyone equally. As argued by Gooptu (2013), the economic changes post 1991 gave birth to a new generation of Indian ‘doers’ who were endowed with an aspirational capital and are “imbued with passion, self-belief and conviction to turn their dreams into reality”. The neoliberal market was seen as the great equalizer in terms of providing the individual with greater choice and self empowerment opportunities.

Lucrative employment opportunities along with the promise of a better life which can be generated in the city were the factors which pulled the migrants to the urban areas. The process of migration to the urban spaces in India captures the momentum of the “common man” in India and their ability to capture the opportunities provided in a liberalizing market economy. For instance, a report by the India Brand Equity Foundation (2023) identifies that India’s retail industry is projected to grow at 9% over 2019-2030 from a US dollar 779 billion to a staggering US 1407 billion by 2026 upto US 1.8 trillion dollars by 2030 with major foreign and national investments being done to the retail sector in India. The same report states that the India’s consumption capacity is still very robust with a household consumption of Rs 130-140 trillion in 2021. These numbers show that the retail sector is here to stay and it absorbs a majority of the migrant labor which can be employed at relatively low costs. What stays hidden is that on the underside of this glitzy and glamorous narrative of the neo-liberal economy, there is a reproduction of social and economic precariousness and the migrant workers employed in these neo-liberal sectors get the shorter end of the stick of development.

### **The Shopping Mall: A Neo-Liberal Site of Consumption**

In this broader context, my paper focuses on a specific neo-liberal site of consumption, the consumer space of the shopping mall. These consumer spaces are located physically within India but often resemble global spaces. The re-imagination and recreation of these spaces project an idea of “Shining India”, a development unlike anything else seen before in India (Brosuis, 2010). These new consumer spaces are expanding at a tremendous rate which can be visually quantified in the increase of funky cafes with unique concepts and new retail chains coming up inside upscale, high rise shopping malls. Unlike the common neighbourhood



markets, the *bazaars* which were characterized by the availability of dry market and wet market goods, shopping malls are a rather unique concept of a market/ consumer space. The shopping mall is an exclusive space, the rights of admission into which are reserved. The shopping malls are unlike traditional market systems, they are usually a multi-storeyed structure with multiple retail shops arranged one after the other marked by restrictions and monitoring. Entry is restricted, the climate is controlled and human interaction is orchestrated in particular customer- client logic. There is also minimum contact with the street leading up to the mall, where the customers are dropped at the very entrance of the mall, ushered in by doormen. This creates a visible feudal hierarchy immediately. On the other hand, the mall itself represents a structure of convenience and luxury, air conditioned shops, background music. Exotic perfume emanates the moment you enter through the glass doors and on top of that services ranging from retail, skincare to entertainment and restaurants are made available under one single roof. The mall as a consumer space embeds itself deeply in the auditory, visual and olfactory sensibilities of the customers. The malls also have a common structure, usually with a main plaza and everything arranged around it, the structure of the mall allows for an easy audit, surveillance and evaluation, with airport style security check at the entry and cameras being fitted at every corner (Voyce, 2007).

Brosius (2010) identifies that the concept of shopping mall was introduced in New Delhi in the 1990's, along with the multiplex, and air conditioned cinemas hall for the upper market economy. One of the most exclusive malls in Delhi is the triad of Ambience mall, Promenade and DLF Emporio at Vasant Kunj. These shopping malls were constructed as standalone structures but the presence of these malls impacted the real estate prices in the area. These spaces are aesthetically built to provide to the consumer an experience parallel to the Global, fashion world- with trends that are New York Street style or Paris Fashion Week style. There is a new globalised space that is created which also provides food experiences from pan Asian to authentic Italian. These spaces like malls are not dominant in numbers but are hegemonic in nature. In Delhi NCR region itself there are a total of 95 malls, out of which 12 are globally recognized as successful real estate projects. The malls fit into an idea of a planned and world class city, where spatial aesthetics cater to the affluent middle and the upper classes. As Brosius (2010) identifies, the transformation of spaces in Delhi into spaces for leisure activity such as shopping and hanging out, bring about an enclave gaze. This enclave gaze is identified as selective perception of reality which shape the lifestyle aspiration and identification of the new middle classes. Going into the mall is understood to be an experience of cosmopolitanism. The Ambience mall, located at Vasant Kunj houses a wide array of outlets, ranging from retail to skincare to food. Spanning four floors, with an additional basement floor opened recently in 2018, the mall houses 98 retail, 32 food joints, 4 entertainment zones, the mall also boasts of services like the ATM, ambulance on call, baby stroller services, car wash, currency converter, valet parking, vending machines and full time concierge that takes care of the information desk, and any first aid care which operates during the opening hours of the day. DLF Promenade located next to Ambience boasts of serving "quality shopping service to customers with chic ambience". DLF Promenade has self-declared itself as a pioneer in "Mall Culture" and houses a number of local and international retail and food chains. These spaces attract audiences of all kinds from time pass flaneurs to affluent local customers to tourists of various kinds. The mall is visited by different groups of people in different times of the day. In the opening hours of the day around 10 am, it is the store workers who begin coming in along with some purposive shoppers. Retail chains that had specific food sections are abuzz

with activity even during the morning half. As the day progresses, more shoppers troop in, the shoppers range across the age spectrum from younger adults to older men and women. Usually during the afternoons, families with children and the older demographic visit the restaurants and for purposive shopping. On weekends, younger couples and friends seek the enclosed and air conditioned spaces as places for unwinding and entertainment. The behavior of the shoppers is varied in terms of regular shoppers and first timers and this is immediately understood in their behavior, seen in terms of how confident they are maneuvering within the mall. The décor of the mall is usually attuned to the “instagram lifestyle” of the younger demographic, women and men who engage at length in clicking pictures at the mall. Dressed at their best, most visit the mall sometimes less to shop, but mostly to see and be seen (Brosius, 2010). Shopping has become more than just a activity, it is a lifestyle concept. Consumption itself has become a pleasure activity. Consumption, distinction and class are closely entwined according to the neo liberal ethic (Brosius 2010). It is not a question of what is being consumed but knowing how to consume it. These spaces are aesthetically built to provide to the new Indian consumer, an experience of being in a global city. The shopping mall as a specific neo-liberal space of consumption highlights the new sensibilities and orchestrated forms of social interaction of the upper and middle classes of India. In a space of this kind, is a section of individuals who occupy very distinct locations and also present distinct social stories, are the migrant workers who are employed as service providers within the structure of the mall.

The migrant workers who are employed as service providers each come with their unique experiences and come from different social backgrounds which shape their social stories. I conducted an ethnographic study at the two malls of Ambience and Promenade at Vasant Kunj, employing observation and interview method and acquainted myself with forty service providers across the three malls. The age group of my sample ranged between 19 to 51 year olds who were enrolled in the various units of the two malls such as retail, food, and beauty and housekeeping sectors. I interviewed a total of 23 women and 17 men across the sectors identified. I have used a comparative framework to analyse how the migrant experience is distinct across two sets of migrants who are employed as service providers in the neo-liberal site of the mall. Collection of data was carried out in two phases, once between 2018 and 2019 and in 2021. The original plan was to conduct the ethnography in a singular phase but since the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in the general migrant experience pushed me to visit the field site again. The plan of action for my study was to look at the malls as a site of ethnography. Shopping mall as a site of emerging new socialities makes it a unique site of study but this does not necessarily gloss over the materialist notions of consumption associated with the site (Aceska & Heer, 2019). Shopping malls are regulated spaces managed by strict apparatus of control and regulation that are enforced by private owners which makes it distinct from public urban spaces managed by the state (Wehrheim 2007 in Aceska & Heer 2019). I planned my field visits to the malls across various times of the day so that I could make a temporal analysis of the two malls in terms of foot fall and social interaction. At the very onset I identified the sectors in which the migrants were employed and classified my interviewees into two sets of migrants, one belonging from northeast India and the other from the rural hinterlands of North India. I purposively approached service providers who were working in the food chains and retail sectors. For professional service providers such as salon and nail art I had to first build a rapport with the service providers as a customer and convince them to agree on a convenient time for me to interview them. What emerged out of these conversations was the





significant ways in which the migrant experience in these neo-liberal sites of consumption are varied across the two groups of migrants.

### **Migrants from Northeast India**

The high visibility among the migrants from the eight states of Northeast India in these new consumer spaces owes to the large rates of out migration from the north eastern region. In the past decade, the numbers of localities in Delhi which have a high concentration of migrants from the North eastern region have increased tremendously. There are particular pockets in the city where the visibility of migrant renters from the northeast is more. Neighbourhoods such as Green Park, Munirka, Safdarjung Enclave, and Safdarjung Development Area, Kotla Mubarakpur and South extension see a huge concentration of migrants from regions creating a material and visible ethnoscape. This phenomenon of the formation of an ethnic enclave is not specific to the migrants from the Northeast India alone but existing literature has pointed out how often ghettoization of communities take place in urban spaces such as in the case of the Muslim community in New Delhi (Thapan, Singh, & Sreekumar, 2016).

Lack of employment opportunities in the government sector due to a corrupt bureaucracy, search of better standards of education and to escape from structural violence and ethnic conflict have acted as major push factors for out-migration from the region. This is the 'classical push and pull' of economic opportunities, in addition to a 'militarized mobility' that is at play when it comes to migrant experience for the people of northeast India (Kikon 2019). As a result, the migrants from the northeast find themselves being increasingly absorbed in the neo-liberal service industries. Studies by McDuie-Ra (2012) and Kikon (2019) note that the migrants from the northeast with their English-speaking skills make them an extremely attractive cohort of labourers for employing in the service industry. The growing impact of Asian Wave, in the form of Korean Beauty products and South east Asian way of dressing have made the migrants from the region perceptible as 'distinct' because they resemble the East Asian populations. These migrants therefore get type-casted for their un-Indian looks that obtain them jobs in the global service sector. Their labour is constructed through an orientalist exoticism mixed with a sense of East Asian cool, that aids in constructing a space that is in India but not of India, that suits the world class taste and aspirations of the middle classes, who are the active consumers of these urban spaces (McDuie-Ra, 2012). The apparent 'lighter skin tone' and mongoloid phenotype is attractive for an international outlook which makes the migrants from Northeast India as preferred employees in the hospitality sector (Woulter and Subba, 2013). Due to this need to cater to a global cosmopolitan ethic, often employment opportunities in neo-liberal spaces become racially signified.

During my fieldwork, what was striking for me was in all of the skincare brands and beauty stores within malls women from the north east were highly visible as salesperson. This systematic recruitment and placement of women from the North eastern states in brands that present a global image demonstrate the particular aesthetic that is intended to be created in these spaces which also reinforces the racial distinctiveness of the migrants from the North East. At the same time, they were also visible as 'professional' staff in the salons inside the malls. Well groomed, well spoken women who were ready to cater to the needs of the customers.

Anna, a 29 year old stylist at a mall outlet of one of the leading salon chains across India, finds her work place to be extremely competitive. She says she did not know what she was signing up for when she had enrolled at a professional salon and hairdressing training centre eight years ago back home. She had always wanted to stay in a metropolitan city like her two elder sisters and for her she wanted to work at a professional workspace rather than just care activities, the sector her sisters are currently employed in. She believes that her skill sets are unique as she knows the latest trend in the market at the moment. She follows celebrities and influencers on social media which makes her aware about the kind of styles that would be preferred by various sets of customers. Anna sees herself as extremely enterprising. Anna is giving her blood and sweat in the current workspace because she wants to be known as the best stylist among her customer base. She believes it is important to build her own customer base in sectors like this unlike retail where the relationships are transitory. Here she believes her skills can help her gain regular customers. I visited the same salon in 2021. According to the management, Anna had joined a different salon chain by then.

Jajo, a 25 year old woman from Manipur said that it is very difficult to find a stable job back home. Although she took her graduation in education with the aim of becoming a teacher, she was unable to find even a school level job for herself back in Manipur. Her first job in Delhi was in the hospitality industry, where she was doing an apprenticeship on a cruise ship, an opportunity she got through one of her contacts from a personality training school where she was enrolled for a while back home. She found that work exhausting because she had to follow a strict routine with proper codes of conduct throughout her shift. On the other hand, she found working at the retail store of a global fashion brand comfortable. She says that getting a professional management degree would be ideal for her to finally get a high paying job but that would require her to save up more, so in the meantime, she had enrolled herself at a part time business administration degree. There is also a sense of lifestyle change she feels she has acquired over the course of her work and stay in Delhi. She feels that now she is more aware of the new market and fashion trends and she feels she is more in sync with the developments around her, which makes her more confident in maneuvering in the city.

The mall as an ethnographic space brings out a lot of peculiarities specific to the migrants from north east India. These peculiarities are interesting because they are specific to this group of migrants. As Kikon (2019) identifies that the affective labour employed by the migrants as they work as servers, masseurs and as receptionists in luxury spa units and hotels, reframe the way migrant labour is understood in neo-liberal India. For most migrants from North east India, their everyday life is dependent on their capacity to express a dual identity of being from an ethnic/ tribal community from the North east and their cosmopolitan identity. This dual role that they play is where they identify themselves as tribal as well as aspiring for upward mobility. Being in a metropolitan city like New Delhi, their reference groups is the local middle class elite with whom they are constantly in interaction with at their place of work. Adopting a cosmopolitan identity has helped them challenge the dominant stereotypes of being backward and uneducated. However the process of adapting a cosmopolitan identity begins before their even migrate to the metropolitan centers. Almost 10 of the young men and women that I had interviewed have had some training at their home state in either on short term courses on hospitality or professional courses on grooming services. As Joesph, 25, young migrant from Mizoram said that he did not want to move to Delhi without being prepared with some kind of skill. He had done a short term course on men's grooming at a local salon back home after completing his higher secondary studies in Mizoram. He did not





find a lucrative employment immediately after he arrived in Delhi. Almost for a year he did odd jobs working as an assistant at a local salon in Humayunpur. That year he tried to pick up as many skills as possible from the senior stylists at the salon. It was finally through one of his friends that he was made aware of an opening at his current place of work. Even at his current workplace he still hasn't been promoted to a stylist but he says he is glad he was able to find work here because he can now see how these big salon chains operate their shop and the kind of awareness and engagement one can have with the customer makes him hopeful that once he has enough experience he can soon do what he had always wanted to do, be a men's grooming expert. What stands out from these narratives is the phenomenon of emerging grooming and hospitality schools in the northeast. Kikon (2019) talks extensively about how there has been an emerging trend of training schools in Nagaland where students are groomed to serve the hospitality industry, an ironic situation in which 'teaching and learning about care occurs in a militarized society' (Ibid, pg 51). This also points to how the risks associated with migration are tackled by potential migrants. The quest for a better life is linked with the understanding that developing particular skill sets would potentially make finding employment opportunities easy as migrant workers.

### **Migrants from The Rural Hinterlands of North India**

Individuals, who migrate from the rural hinterlands of North India in most cases in my sample, belonged to the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Classes communities of India. The migration trends from the rural hinterlands of North India to New Delhi is not new, in fact it has been expanding as a phenomenon. Various factors such as the economic disparities between the rural and industrialized, urban centers, the expansion of non-farm employment opportunities and the increasing precarity of agrarian employment have led to out-migration from the rural hinterlands of the states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh. Although the absorption of migrants from north India is not exclusive to the service sector, the expansion of new consumer spaces and the demand for services in Delhi makes the service sector a lucrative avenue for migrants seeking employment. Studies have established how out migration from the rural hinterlands have framed the trajectory of migration in neo-liberal India (Banerjee et al 1994, Mishra 2016, Acharya 2021). This section expands qualitatively on the experiences of the migrants, just before and after the covid 19 pandemic.

Migrants from the rural hinterlands of north India are employed at two levels of the service sector in two shopping malls. One set of people were found to be employed as sanitation workers and security guards and another set as salespersons in the retail and food units of the mall. What is interesting for these set of migrants is that irrespective of their position within the organization every one of them had to undergo some amount of language training before joining the job. The most important part of this training was teaching them how to interact with the customers or given training in "soft skills". This included self presentation, grooming and inculcating a sense of confidence. Even the service providers at the lower end of the scale are taught basic English as required. Those often employed as security guards and doormen are given certain knowledge of the language such as learning to speak certain basic phrases and greetings such as "Hello Ma'am/Sir", "Thank You Ma'am/Sir", when addressing any customer. Gooptu(2009) had identified an important part of neoliberal job market is the emphasis on soft skills- like self presentation, grooming, polite behavior and refined English vocabulary are emphasized. The migrants from rural hinterlands that are employed as lower

level service providers at the mall are prepared for the neo-liberal aesthetic. They are trained to make their interactions, however short and fleeting with the customers professional.

This creates a definitive experience for the migrants coming from the rural hinterlands. For instance, 35 year old Reena, who had been employed as a security guard for a contract period of twelve months for a retail unit at the mall, had major reservations about working at the mall because it required her to wear trousers as uniform. Before joining the job of the security guard she was working as part time house-help in a couple of houses in Lajpat Nagar, a locality in South Delhi but she decided to switch to this job because she was told it would pay her better. She landed the job because her husband's friend had contacts with the security agency which employs her. Reena had moved into the city with her husband in 2015 from Bihar and then she had been working as a house-help but now that she has enrolled her son at school, she needed more income for the household. Three months into the new job Reena feels her uniform makes her seem more confident. Learning how to use phrases like 'Hello Ma'am', "Thank you" is important as she believes with this basic knowledge she could get another job with the same requirements elsewhere. She has decided that she would not be going back to Bihar.

Younger migrants within this same group, those with a minimum educational degree, saw their job as a channel to be upwardly mobile. They are also actively engaged in networking to get access to opportunities which they thought would be lucrative for them and would improve their life chances. One respondent identified that while doing his graduation from a school of open learning he got to know that retail is a profitable sector and he was able to procure his first job through some of his network of friends. Sonu, 28 who hails from rural Uttar Pradesh had been living in the city of Delhi for the past three years. When he had first shifted he knew he wanted to work in retail but he did not know whether his BCom degree would be enough for him to catch a break in the retail sector. According to Sonu, "A lot of people enter the field of retail service because they get to learn a lot from the business itself through the experience of working. Everyone has a different attitude that helps in learning from each other. Learning doesn't always happen from books and classes alone, there is a lot to learn from the supervisors and seniors on the job."

The pandemic did prove to be a difficult period of time as it stopped their steady flow of income which made it tricky for many migrants to sustain them in the city. "I realized that my job is only contractual but I can earn enough to sustain here but yes it is true that the Covid 19 lockdown made life difficult in the city without work. Some of us could not even manage to go back to our villages but we stayed because who knows when we would have been able to come back. There is nothing to do back home." The precarious conditions of the migrant workers employed in the service sectors only heightened during the pandemic but moving back to their homes was not the option for many.

### **In Transit: The Migrant Experience In Neo-Liberal India**

The occupational demands of the neo-liberal economy have opened up employment opportunities and many individuals migrate to the urban metropolitan centers to take advantage of these prospects, especially those in the private sector. However these organized private sector jobs are still very informal. There is a quantitative gap between those employed at the higher and lower end of the services. A common thread that connects the experiences of these two groups of migrants identified above, apart from their obvious placement within



a particular site of employment is how they negotiate their identities as migrant service sector employees in an increasingly global city. Both these groups of migrants get a selective access to these spaces. They are a part of these spaces in the capacity of service providers rather than as primary consumers. Almost of all my respondents reiterated that although they sometimes aspire to reach a class position in which they are able to become the consumers of these high end services. In seeking opportunities, migrants with some level of formal education and skill training can access employment that can be categorized as more 'visual' such as salespersons or service providers that require direct customer interactions. On the other hand, migrant workers with zero-to basic formal education and minimum skill training often get placed in jobs such as housekeeping services or as security guards. This creates a new set of hierarchies within these spaces. The obvious organizational hierarchy lies in the hyper-visibility of the managers, the serving staff /sales staff who are equipped with a certain presentation of speaking in a particular language, looking and being a particular way. These characteristics are not predisposed to all sets of service providers. Mixed with neo-liberal need to create a global market image, these neo-liberal spaces reproduce hierarchies which the urban migrants become disposed to. This is where the indigenous migrants from North east India seem to have greater visibility because they reproduce the de-Indianised aesthetic that these neo-liberal space aspire to have without the need to import foreign labour (McDurie 2012).

What emerged as a common trend across these two groups of migrants were the emerging aspirations of being upward mobility among the migrants. The idea of self making through the acquisition of a lifestyle is common across these categories of migrants. Even for those with minimum qualifications and skill sets, getting employed in New Delhi is easier than it is back in their native places and there is a general tendency to believe that if one puts in minimum hours of the day in the job, that still gains them enough economic capital. This essentially reinforces that fact that although the neo-liberal market economy offers possibilities of individual economic mobility, without cultural capital and social networks, it is difficult to maneuver in the new social spheres emerging in urban India. In these neo-liberal sites of consumption, education plays a defining role in moulding the lives and experiences of migrants in urban India. Even in a free market economy, the lack of certain cultural capital creates divergent experiences for the migrant workers. In such a scenario, informal educational practices like on-the-job training, peer to peer -learning shape the experiences of urban migrants in India.

Studies have shown a great deal of linkage between caste and migration, and how social networks facilitate migration patterns (Singh 2014, Rai 2014). The Caste and ethnic networks have continued to play an important role in the migrant experience even today, more so during and after the period of the pandemic. Caste networks have historically been useful for migrants when they have had nowhere else to go, acting either as knowledge networks for getting employment opportunities or as safe houses during times of crisis. During the long lockdown when of the migrants couldn't go back home, they relied on these ties for support. These networks often act as a reminder of the regional and communitarian ties for the migrants. Most migrants from the states of Northeast India are very rarely homeless or live in illegal dwellings because their kin, clan, familial, and ethnic ties ensure that migrants have a place to stay even if they have no money (McDuie-Ra, 2010). Kinship and associational ties often become the motivating factors for migration to the metropolitan centers. In the study of Kuki migrants in Delhi, Kipgen and Panda (2019) highlight the significance of pioneer

migrants and follower migrants, in which the former provides a safety net to the latter as they make a transition from their home to their place of work. Kinship networks of caste and ethnicity become an important resource for migrants from the rural hinterlands of north India and from the northeast India respectively as they shift their economic bases to the metropolitan city. These networks provide a safety net and often act as channels of knowledge through which information about any opportunities and job vacancies trickle down to the migrants.

What makes the two migrant experiences different is their distinct ethnic, racial and caste identities although subsumed under the larger migrant experience. For most northeastern migrants in Delhi, their everyday life is dependent on their capacity to express a dual identity of being from an ethnic/ tribal community from the North east and their cosmopolitan identity. This dual role that they play is where they identify themselves as tribal as well as aspiring for upward mobility, leading to inferences of a growing “class aspirations” among the migrant. Living in the metropolitan city of New Delhi, their reference group is the middle class and upper class elite with whom they constantly interact with at their place of work. For them adopting a cosmopolitan identity is an active way to challenge the dominant stereotypes of ‘tribal’ being backward and uneducated. The mall as an ethnographic space brings out a lot of peculiarities specific to the migrants from north east India. These peculiarities are mostly essential features of identification among the migrant northeasterners and in what ways is the trajectory of migration specific to this group of migrants. As Kikon (2019) and McDucie-Ra (2012) identifies, affective labour that indigenous migrants gets absorbed into, qualifies their migrant labour experience in the urban cities of India.

Additionally, in work space negotiations, there is a conflicting sense of politeness and dismissiveness. In one of the occasions at H&M, I witnessed a customer coming up to a salesperson who was from Manipur and ask for her help in choosing between two pairs of trousers and engaging in an interesting conversation about styles and outfits that are in fashion. On the other hand, Chon who is from Arunachal Pradesh and has been working in the retail business since 2013 told me that there have been times when customers have gone on to dispute with the billing and told her off about not knowing her job. On the other hand, Anju who belongs to Uttar Pradesh and who is stationed in the washroom of the mall has faced dismissive attitudes from the customers and feel like her work often gets invisibilised. Prem, who works as a housekeeping staff at Ambience is often anxious about the futility of his job of cleaning the same floors day in and day out without even getting any acknowledgement from the people. This begs the observation that caste based occupational barriers is still as much in operation even in supposedly equalizing neo-liberal spaces. On the other hand Sakshi, who works as a ‘shopping assistant’ in one of the bigger retail chains at DLF Promenade says that this is only her part time job as she is pursuing her diploma in fashion designing from a prestigious college and wishes to open her own fashion boutique in Lucknow soon after she graduates.

## **Conclusion**

In identifying the narratives of the migrant workers from two distinct regions of India, this paper draws from the ethnography of two shopping malls in India and has attempted to highlight the migrant labour experience in the urban neo-liberal spaces of 21st century India. This paper also deep dived into the neo-liberal transformations of the city into Global



production spaces and how different sets of people interact with the same space. Caste identities, ethnic identities and racial identities offer different experiences for migrants in urban India. Ascription based identities define the trajectory of aspirations and how neo-liberal structures reproduce new sets of hierarchies and differences. The neoliberal market economy which claims to distribute material and social rewards ostensibly according to the hard work and merit of individuals is largely flawed as caste, ethnic and racial identities continue to hold precedence in determining the final destination of individuals in the so called 'free market' driven economy. The post-pandemic era has reinstated the precarious nature of migrants and has exposed the various fault lines that exist.

The migrant experience in this neo-liberal consumption space is oriented to the larger ethic of neo-liberalism in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. Most of the migrants maneuver their aspirations according to the neo-liberal ethic as highlighted above. The aspirations of the migrants are defined by a thrust to secure a comfortable and 'good' life which according to them is 'Acchi zindagi'. For individuals who have migrated to the capital city from the Northeast and the rural hinterlands of North India, they see Delhi as a site of opportunity and a city that might help them improve their life chances. However, the migrant labor experience is unique for each set of migrants as it is conditioned by the structural hierarchies and barriers of caste, ethnic and racial typecasting which are reproduced in these spaces and manifested in their everyday practices.

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