

Review

Being a tribal man from the North-East: Migration, Morality and Masculinity by Duncan McDuie-Ra

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Duncan McDuie-Ra is an Australian academician who has done extensive research on the subject of Northeast migrants in New Delhi. He has written numerous articles on Northeast Indian culture and society, all of which are published in reputed journals and are excerpt from his more critically acclaimed book 'Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail'. The article highlights the intersection between masculinity, ethnicity and migration within national boundaries with particular references to the Northeast frontier of India. For McDuie-Ra the theory that 'migration cause the production and reproduction of masculine norms' is relevant to understand the tribals of Northeast India. In Delhi, the concept of masculinity is reshaped in the face of changing gender relations and the status of tribals as a minority ethnic community.

The article used the interpretative paradigm of study. He conducted ethnographic field research in Delhi from December 2010 to February 2011 and again in December 2011. The research is also informed by ten years of regular ethnographic fieldwork in Northeast India itself, primarily in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland. The author established rapport, lived and interacted with his respondent in order to understand their everyday experiences and realities. In Delhi, the author lived in a North easterner's neighbourhood, travelled with tribal migrants around the city and conducted interviews and conversations in the places where tribal migrants live, work and study. Delhi was chosen as the universe of study to understand the problem of tribal migration for three reasons: First, it has the largest community of tribal migrants outside the Northeast region, second, the tribal community in Delhi is more diverse and third, Delhi is the ultimate choice of destination for the tribals either to pursue their education or career.

The article has six main sections respectively. In the first section, the author discussed the concept of tribal masculinity in the context of Northeastern societies. The concept was defined by traditional male roles in tribal society like hunting, warfare, slave-taking, and land brokering and dispute resolution. Masculinity is also shaped by their participation in armed struggle against the Indian state, between different ethnic and tribal groups and

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between communities indigenous to the region and migrants. The section also highlights the interesting paradox with regard to women status and role in the region. Most Northeastern societies are patriarchal in nature (including Khasi society of Meghalaya which is matrilineal but not matriarchal), yet female literacy rates are among the highest, women get married later than elsewhere in India and employment rates for women are well above the national average in the tribal majority states. Despite all the above factors which seems to imply that women are empowered, violence against women within tribal societies is very high due to the underlying strong patriarchal relations within.

Migration from the Northeast frontier to Indian cities has increased rapidly. Limited livelihood prospects, changing social aspirations and sporadic armed conflicts push migrants out of the region. Therefore, people leave the region due to ongoing conflicts, to pursue livelihoods, careers and consumer lifestyles. Experiences of racism, violence and discrimination are integral to the everyday experiences of the Northeasterners' in Delhi. They are judged by their distinct physical appearances which marked them as separate from the Indian mainstream. These stereotypes carry over into discrimination in the housing market, in the labour market and with the authorities, especially when attempting to seek justice for harassment and violence.

In the third section the author discussed the feelings of guilt and futility among male tribal migrants. Guilt emanates from having to leave behind friends and relatives behind in a dangerous environment for pursuing one's own interests like income, education or security. They engaged themselves in the politics of home in Delhi to compensate for their inability to participate, as members of ethnically oriented student unions and as part of pan tribal movements that emerge around particular issues, such as protests against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act or against incidents of violence against tribal migrants. The shift in psychological study is continued in the fourth section which analyses changing gender relations among tribal migrants and their impact on masculinity. The tribal men have a tendency for a strong feeling of responsibility to protect their women especially against outsiders to the family or the community. This becomes problematic in the new urban setting in which changing gender roles, differing responses and adaptability to urban life causes tensions in gender relations and men's control over women. Women are more adaptable to the urban life-style and no longer wants to be protected by their men.

The fifth section analyses the ways tribal men adapt to the urban environment and express masculinity through everyday urban encounters. Though many of the tribal communities are a majority in their own homelands, they have to adjust to the minority community status in Delhi. This they found to be extremely emasculating. They are subjected to racism and discrimination but they are not in a position to fight back. They had to negotiate and navigate to find new ways to be masculine by exercising agency in common urban encounters; in labour markets, with landlords and unscrupulous city inhabitants.

Finally, the author summarised the whole article in the last section and concludes that 'migration is a major catalyst in rupturing and reshaping masculinity in temporary and lasting ways'. Identities, both ethnic and gendered are being challenged as well as reinforced through migration between the Northeast frontier and Delhi.

The paper in many instances makes the mistake of defining categories like 'Northeasterners' and 'tribal migrants' as homogenised population. This is problematic as the Northeastern societies are characterised by both tribals and non-tribals and also people from diverse backgrounds and affiliations. The only mention of the 'non-tribals' by the author is in page 254 when he is citing a survey report of the North East Support Centre. There is so much of generalisations about the tribes of Northeast India, but this is understandable as he is dealing with an area as vast and diverse as the Northeast region. For instance, he simply make a generalising statement that people go to Hyderabad and Bangalore for work and Kolkata for study is false. The Northeastern communities are there in most of the cities of India both for work and education. The repeated and uncritical use of the word 'tribal' is also questionable as it is a contentious term. Today, the term 'Adivasi' is preferred in central tribal belt and 'scheduled tribes' or simply 'tribes' is preferable in Northeast region for the earlier reputation of the word 'tribal' as a derogatory word.

The study interestingly makes a departure from existing literatures on Northeast India which focused on ethno-nationalist politics, insurgency, and internal displacement. The exhaustive collection of ethnographic data is admirable and his work, particularly for its comparative coverage of all Northeastern states is an outstanding academic contribution to an area that has limited literature.