CONSOLIDATING THE SISTERS: SOUL FOOD AND THE REPRODUCTION OF FESTIVALS

BETSAME LAMAR

zubaan

ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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Yei tre ham ïa mylleiñ
Han em I heiwon heiwon[1]
—Yoobiang Pariat

For a protracted length of time, people have been and are still in the condition of moving. As a result of this growing by the year, migration has attained the status of a global phenomenon. However, it is not a one-way process but a charged action; it brings to the fore notions of belonging and un-belonging and sparks a discourse on varied issues pertaining to the question of migration in general. For instance, what does it mean to move? What will be the implications on the host society? What are the elements that govern the relationship between the entity of moving and the location of aspiration and purpose? These conditions are not only affixed to movements beyond the nation-state, but are pertinent to all kinds of movement, thus resulting in the ever-increasing need to articulate and affirm one's identity.

This manifestation is seen in Northeast India with individuals continually moving to the rest of the country. This movement is meaningful because it points to the politics of how the region, which has been rendered marginal, is engaging with the notion of India, and how in this action there is an embodiment of differing strands of affirmation, reclamation and reassertion.

The 'Northeast', as the area is referred to, is primarily a geographic description. However, the term is synonymously used to merge all the eight states into one, exhibiting one character. Similarly, it is ambiguously used to refer to individuals from the region, culminating in the formation of a 'Northeast identity'. Although the use of this concept is problematic, in the context of migration, when one finds it difficult to express one's identity, it can also be accommodating. As McDuie-Ra (2012: 147) argues, the concept of the 'Northeast' conjures a form of solidarity that exists in the host society rather than the region, where it is not as prevalent. Therefore, Wouters and Subba's (2013: 130) definition is suitable because it views the term as implying 'anything and nothing at the same time'. It can thus be said that the term is a two-sided coin: convenient as well as dubious. Yet, I must mention that despite indicating the contradictory nature of the term, 'Northeast' is used in this paper to indicate the region as a collective whole. This is because of the unavailability of a better term. However, in its conscious usage I am attentive to not let this categorisation obliterate the complexity of each State. Apart from this, the term 'Frontier' (McDuie-Ra 2012: 30) has also been used to overcome the inadequacies of 'Northeast'.

This paper is located in the larger schema of migration though it is bound by a specificity that looks at the conditions in the host society. It considers the status of migrants from the Northeast living in Delhi. Localities such as Humayunpur in South Delhi and Mukherjee Nagar in North Delhi are thus the ground for the study; the former, the largest 'Northeast' locality in the city and the latter slowly growing into one. The creation of such localities is what McDuie-Ra (2012: 145) calls 'place-making'. This paper argues for the need to create a diaspora

within the country and how this will lead to greater recognition of the constituents of the migrant population.

Subsequently, the paper is divided into two sections: one on the importance of celebrating festivals, and the second on recognising the value of food and hence the relevance of restaurants.

The migrants considered in this study are included because of their indigeneity to the region and are classified as 'indigenous migrants', that is, 'people who … self-identify and assert themselves as tribal or indigenous' (Kikon and Karlsson 2019: 7) and who are similarly seen as a 'social category produced and reified *vis-à-vis* mainstream India' (Wouters and Subba 2013: 131). Although the term 'migrant' is problematic (Remesh 2012: 38), it is nonetheless applied because of the lack of a more appropriate alternative. Additionally, the idea of 'home' as used in the paper speaks of comfort and care and is an 'affective construct' (Hage 2010: 418) connected to the home—actual or imagined—that is present in the Frontier. Hence, this paper is a reflection of the sentiments retained by the larger indigenous population, and fundamentally the trajectory follows a subjective rather than an objective route.

WITHIN THE INSIDE: THE CREATION OF A DIASPORA

One of the indispensable tenets of the concept of a diaspora involves a movement from the 'centre' to the periphery (Safran 1991: 83), whereby the nexus between the labels depends not on the pre-eminent notion of what the words signify, but on the terms constructed by the individual who migrates. This indicates that the centre is the homeland, a point of origin both in terms of the journey and in terms of having grown up in that place, and the periphery is the host-land.

What this connotes is that an individual cannot dwell in a diaspora without contextualising the people that constitute it, the reasons why they embody it and most importantly the entire process of moving

and migrating. My usage of the article 'a' in relation to diaspora is pertinent to the context I am referring to: of considering a definitive group for research, for instance, the South Asian diaspora or the Indian diaspora. This, however, will not be as applicable when one is referring to diaspora as a broader theoretical concept for a critical engagement.

Hence, it is befitting to briefly talk about the phenomenon of migration before establishing a category as a diaspora. Contrary to extensive research on migration and its existence in India, there is little research on migration from the Northeast (McDuie-Ra 2012). Despite this, there has been an increase in the momentum for analytically looking at the area. The works on this are comprehensive in nature and follow varying perspectives. Haksar's (2016) account, for instance, explores this phenomenon by intimately looking at the lives of four Tangkhul migrants. She provides snippets of penetrating insights into the condition of the region and of the migrants' lives, which in their entirety add a cumulative depth to her book. By focusing on a particular tribe, Haksar breaks away from the generalisation that is usually associated with the region, yet her stories have a ubiquitous essence that speaks to the lives of other migrants as well.

Among available literature, one can see that all scholars unanimously agree on the reasons why individuals migrate from the region: the classical push and pull reason (Kikon and Karlsson 2019), which at an advanced level is theorised by the economic 'Todaro Model "Push-Pull"' theory on migration' (Rajan and Chyrmang 2016: chap. 5). Additionally, there is a general consensus that there is an increase in migration.

McDuie-Ra (2012: 44) constructs the term 'Migration Moment', which is an increase in the rate of migration. He elaborates on this by broadly categorising the push and pull factors under six themes: refuge, livelihood, aspirations, attitude towards India, labour recruitments and connectivity. These themes are interconnected and can be encapsulated within the idea that individuals migrate because they seek refuge from the militarised atmosphere in the region. In addition, he mentions that people migrate not because of a sudden outbreak

of violence but because of the prevailing sense of impending conflict. Further, individuals are drawn by the multifarious job opportunities only available outside their native land.

Following a similar concept, Remesh (2016: chap. 4) says that this mass migration is a City-Bound Exodus. He states that unlike other forms of migration that exist in the country, whereby individuals move to break free from abject poverty, individuals from the Frontier move for 'education and employment considerations'. He discusses a two-stage migration theory, whereby individuals initially migrate for education and later stay on for employment. He demonstrates this exodus by highlighting the unavailability of jobs either due to the condition of saturation or the uncongenial condition of being overqualified for the existing jobs.

In addition to education and employment as rationales for migrating, Marchang (2018) asserts that the reason for an increase in the rate of migration is a phenomenon of 'chain migration', whereby 'prospective migrants learn of opportunities…have initial accommodation and employment arrangements by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants' (MacDonald quoted in Marchang 2018: 177). This emphasises the centrality of communication and assistance between the migrant and the prospective migrant. Thus, it facilitates a situation through which not only do the wealthy migrate, but individuals from all economic backgrounds; it is enabling also for individuals residing in remote towns and villages to make the move. This is invocative of McDuie-Ra's theme of connectivity.

Thus, the push factors come from the disturbance that is always brewing and due to a dearth of employment prospects; as a result of which, there is a prevailing sense of hardship. On the contrary, the pull factors come from the possibilities thought to be available and how they can contribute to changing the lives of the migrants. It is a dream based on representations of an idealised notion of a city, which is poignantly presented by Haksar (2016) in her depictions. However, on arrival, migrants are often greeted by a sense of disenchantment, a

shattered form of reality that lacerates their existence. What aggravates this emotion is a profound sense of betrayal, which derives from the fact that despite possessing the required legal *indicators* of citizenship, their *staying* is always under question, always under vigilance and always under a condition of maltreatment.

When considering all the forms of differential treatment ranging from extreme and unreasonable forms of violence resulting in death to the frequent use of epithets, the most common being 'chinky' and its various sub-categorisations which imprint the same form of offence, as well as the so-called trivial instances occurring in the everyday, it becomes discernible that this particular form of treatment operates along the lines of racism. However, as Jilangamba (2012) notes, its existence is not acknowledged because it is un-provable and is considered un-Indian and existing only in the West. What is considered Indian is however rooted in casteism, and therefore the argument that is advocated by individuals who disacknowledge racism suggests that all members belonging to the lower castes are *allegedly* exposed to the same form injustices and hence are no different from individuals who face discrimination on the basis of race. This argument is a fallacy because its basis is the presumption that both race and caste are the same and can be used interchangeably, and besides that, there is a denial of the atrocities that are evidently committed. Another crude rejection of the idea of racism is a counter argument that all citizens within the purview of the country are Indians and by acknowledging racism one is inferring that they are not Indian, and it would be a paradox of the whole schema if they assert their recognition in the Indian mainstream. This is based on an idea of the existence of one homogeneous race that ultimately defines the concept of Indianess. Adding to the rejection of violence prompted by race, McDuie-Ra (2012: 103) notes the infamous counter declaration that puts forth the city as unsafe and subsequently no 'community is immune'. This argument marginalises the entire issue and consequently empowers other individuals to inflict violence without facing consequences.

Despite the dismissal of racism, the limited information that gets reported and other limitless unreported voices testify to its living reality. I firmly believe that the rationale for its existence is the act of 'othering', a creation of a dichotomy whether intentionally or unintentionally (as is often believed). This concept is established by Hay's *Idea of Europe,* which is a collective notion of Europeans as 'us' and non-Europeans as 'them' (quoted in Said 1978: 7). The division presupposes that one category, 'us', is more knowledgeable and powerful, its stance always absolute; and that the other category, 'them', is always in contradiction, its existence based entirely on an antithesis; here, identity is consolidated through difference.

Said in *Orientalism* (1978) expounds on this concept and claims that a group of individuals living together will create 'geographical distinctions' (54) and that this creation of a territorial familiarity functions on the basis of a 'positional superiority' (7), which does not require the acknowledgment of an outsider, who contrary to them, is considered a barbarian. For Said, Orientalism is a 'style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and "the Occident"' (2). He further states that by the end of the 18th century, it was firmly established as a 'corporate institution' (3) dealing with the Orient. Additionally, he analyses and calls it, using a Foucauldian term, a discourse of power and knowledge, and emphasises on its use because without its employment it would be difficult to establish the process of its operation and its functionality will be complicated. For the Orientals, 'knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control' (36). Likewise, it continues to exist because it has been sustained by an internal consistency of cultural hegemony. Thus, the relationship in Orientalism is based on that 'of power, of domination … [and] a complex hegemony' (5).

If we consider this Orientalist discourse, then India as a whole can be in a subjected position: a case of being studied and represented and its existence integrally supplementing European 'material civilization' (Said 1978: 2). This includes both monetary enhancements and being

able to define Europe as an enlightened culture and a civilisation as opposed to the region. Therefore, the functioning of this Orientalist mechanism is not typically considered to be working within the country itself, but rather is seen as being entirely applied to it.

However, I argue that the discourse functions within the country and its result is the perpetual case of othering. Wouters and Subba (2013) identified the concept of a 'physiognomic map' (127) based on face phenotypes rather than on territoriality. This implies that the idea of being Indian is inscribed under various phenotypes, which they term 'Indian Face' (ibid.). They affirm that this face includes a wide variety of phenotypes and is 'inherently plural and … inclusive', and despite this, the idea of Indianness and of a multifarious face is accepted and is never confounding. However, they argue that the Mongoloid phenotype such as the 'epicanthic fold, high cheekbones', which is predominantly present in individuals who are from the north-eastern region of the country, is unfamiliar and does not fall under the category of the Indian Face, thus resulting in the physiognomic map excluding individuals with such phenotypes and eventually marginalising and discriminating against them. Similarly, Po'dar and Subba (1991) illustrate the concept of 'home-grown Orientalism' (83), which indicates how Indian anthropologists have become Orientalists. By looking into a number of ethnographic texts on the Himalayas, they demonstrate that the work that has been done is largely based on the hegemonic discourse of 'Europeanizing or Americanizing' (ibid.) the Himalayas. In following and imitating this tradition, they mention that power becomes a domineering trait because it assumes that the anthropologists are in a superior position, a position that possesses knowledge about the region. This power is then reflected in the marginalisation and the orientalisation of the zone.

Based on these two stances, I arrive at a position of what I call Re-Orientalism.[2] Whereas 'Home-grown Orientalism' specifically deals with anthropologists, my claim is that Re-Orientalism is not only limited to a specific academic field, but includes all individuals who are situated in what is called 'mainland' India. Accordingly, it indicates the

process of overstepping the realms from being an Oriental to being in a position of the Occident. This entails assuming power and assimilating a thought process that is generally associated with the notion of transgression. Coincidentally, the geographic demarcation of India invariably acts as a stimulus. The act of orientalising presupposes two fixed categories, and for the longest time the generalised idea of India as a nation-state—provincially as well as physiognomically—has always been exclusive of the Frontier; principally, the most important element of this delimitation is the 'Chicken's Neck', which is a precarious narrow stretch of land connecting the Frontier to the rest of India. In this analogous image, the attention centres around and inside the body, whereas the neck and the head are discarded and neglected. Further, what is ironic and disconcerting is the repetition of Said's model, where the West dominates and the East is dominated, which in this context corresponds to the 'mainland' being the binary opposite of the Frontier, and the Frontier made to correspond to the Western conceptualisation of passivity and impotence of the East, simply because of its positionality in the West-East binary. Thus, Re-Orientalism is an inversion of Said's work and foregrounds that even within a nation-state the concept prevails and validates the power relations that form the basis of this structure.

Re-Orientalism manifests itself in various possibilities and actions, and though already articulated in works on the Northeast, it is important to reiterate these instances to acknowledge its reality. Daniel, a graduate student from the Delhi School of Economics, who has lived in Delhi for more than five years, recounted a situation where he was confronted by a pair of strangers who characterised him as an individual who stank of rice and chicken chilly. This incident occurred when he exited a Chinese restaurant. Similarly, I am reminded of an incident that occurred on a crisp winter evening, just before dinner in a university hostel in New Delhi. The air was engulfed in fog and had a particular burning smell; the 'stench' that emanated was considered intolerable and resulted in chaotic situation with everyone covering their noses and trying to find the source of the smell. Since the smell

was coming from a particular area in which students from the Frontier lived together, it was concluded—on the basis of rumours—that the students were broiling a dog! In fact, they were just roasting some *ngari* (fermented fish), which if placed on a 'stinky' scale, would not even compare with the other 'distinct' dishes. Although no action was taken against the students, an inspection following this incident confiscated all cooking utensils in the hostel.

Morrot et al. (2001)[3] talk about the importance of sight and how it majorly affects other sensory aspects and creates a form of perceptual illusion. With reference to their work, it becomes a distressing issue to note that the feature of sight plays a crucial role in the process of othering individuals. Thus, in Daniel's case 'they' see him as an 'outsider' and start believing in the illusion of him emitting the smell of rice and chicken, which is an Orientalist association. In the hostel, 'they' saw the smoke coming from a section occupied by these residents, and 'they' therefore made condescending judgments in which savagism[4] was derided.

On a larger scale, these issues are very repetitive. The most recent incident of Re-Orientalism occurred in October 2019 in Chennai in which around 40 individuals from the Frontier were detained on the possibility of them being protestors. The protest was held by Tibetans in relation to the meeting of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The arrested individuals were 'considered' to be Tibetans despite their futile attempts at showing their identity cards and their statements that they were not present at the protest site. Further, to be bailed out, the accused were asked to produce individuals who would sign a bond guaranteeing that they will not engage in the protest. On another level, we see a gendered form of Re-Orientalism, and as argued by Mukherjee and Dutta (2018), this differential treatment principally derives from migrants being considered as foreigners. They affirm that this discrimination is further stimulated by the intersection of gender with various identities such as that of ethnicity and class. This study lays emphasis on statistically expounding the voluminous accounts of discrimination—which,

among many examples, include the perception of women from the Frontier as being less 'sexually conservative' (278). I would, however, like to mention a specific case which occurred in June 2017, in which Tailin Lyngdoh despite being invited was directed to move out of the Delhi Golf Club because in the *Jaiñsem*[5] that she was wearing, she 'looks different, [looks] like a servant and looks like a Nepalese' (Barthakur 2017). This overall reflects that on the basis of dresses and appearances, women from the Frontier are always judged as being promiscuous, but when dressed in traditional attire are seen as being the Other.

Consequently, living becomes a challenge due to this constant othering. It becomes more unsettling when the offenders claim that they are not involved in the process of othering, but are instead purporting that migrants are equal citizens and should be treated as such; their actions, however, unveil a domineering stance towards the un-belongingness of migrants. This is notably observed when beneficiaries of affirmative actions are charged with not belonging at a particular place because their minority status directly grants them the position without them having to work as hard or at all! Moreover, in the digital age of pop culture, beneficiaries are targeted by offenders who share jokes and memes[6] that are highly inequitable and prejudiced, but are not considered as such because they initially start with offenders expressing that they are, 'not racist or discriminating' and end with them saying, 'It's just for humour!' Similarly, these forms of micro-aggressions also occur among various circles of 'friends'. What is problematic is the fact that these stances reflect an unconcerned attitude towards social and economic inequalities and inequities. It is also disquieting because they are especially articulated in higher educational spaces, which are usually considered to be free of intolerance; and if this occurs in such sectional spaces, what predominantly occurs at the macro level is unfathomable. Therefore, as Jilangamba (2012) writes, it is the 'unseen machinations', the 'everyday forms of racial discrimination that bruise the body and the

mind, build up anger and frustration … [which ultimately] exhausts our attempts at expression.'

In this interest, I equate migrants from the Northeast as disaporans, and assert that they *should* be viewed as a diasporic group not only because of the reasons cited earlier, but because the movement from the region towards the city spatially replicates a movement outside the country. There is a drastic climatic change and the overall culture is different from the everyday practices at Home. They thus experience an out-of-country and an out-of-place feeling; it is 'relocation' (Kikon and Karlsson 2019: 6). In this assertion, I am attentive to not 'appropriate' the discourse (Clifford 1994: 306), and am cautious of Brubaker's (2005: 1) '"diaspora" diaspora', which talks of the proliferation of diasporas and the extension of their usage for various accommodations. For him, it is 'a dispersion of the meanings in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space' (ibid.). He associates it with Sartori's latitudinarian approach, which is the idea of letting 'a thousand diasporas bloom.' He writes,

> The problem with this … approach is that the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness. If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power – its ability to pick out phenomenon, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora (3).

However, the Northeast diaspora is constructed on the basis of general agreement amongst scholars about the features of a diaspora, which can be broadly categorised into three. For Butler (2001: 192) the first is having two minimum destinations (this is a 'precondition for the formation of links' and likewise will enable for 'internal networks' to be formed); the second is a relationship to the homeland; and the third, a conscious self-awareness of one's identity. Similarly, for Brubaker (2005: 5-6) the construction of a diaspora is grounded in three constitutive elements: first, a Dispersion (not only beyond the state, but inclusive of movements '*within* state borders'); second, a Homeland Orientation which becomes the source of identity (this

orientation includes both the classic model centring on the notion of origin and the postmodern aspect of emphasising on decentring and fluidity); and third, a strong Boundary Maintenance which is an awareness and a 'preservation of a distinctive *identity* vis-à-vis a host society' (emphasis added).

Despite Tumbe's (2018) phenomenal work on migrations in India, and thereafter identifying the concept and existence of various internals diasporas in the country, his work neglects the existence of a diaspora from the Frontier. On the contrary, other scholarly works acknowledge that the practices that these migrants engage in are very similar to a diasporic framework (McDuie-Ra 2012; Kikon and Karlsson 2019). The closest that comes to this assertion is Smith and Gergan's study (2015),[7] which argues that Himalayan youth engage in 'diasporic practices' (4). However, despite a comprehensive analysis, their study follows a similar tradition because it ends with the recognition of the existence of this concept. On the contrary, I am contending that the Northeast diaspora should not be limited to just this 'stance' (Brubaker 2005: 12), but must be asserted and proclaimed.

The need for a diaspora, therefore, materialises from the fact that such categorisations become a source of empowerment for a minority group in a homogenising culture and furthermore becomes a signifier in the political struggle in defining the group's distinctiveness (Clifford 1994). This does not imply going against the host society but indicates a healthy coexistence of cultures, which in Zhang's (2010) words is a process of transrelation.[8] Further, in the articulation of the Northeast diaspora, it becomes a legitimising act that does not obliterate the essence of distinctiveness and diversity of the region, yet at the same time is equalised by an acceptance of the region as a single integrative entity because the very notion of diaspora is suggestive of an all-encompassing term that accommodates various differing strands under one umbrella. Ultimately, the assertion of a diaspora is a process of being acknowledged and finally of reclaiming a forgotten space and face.

A MERRY GOOD TIME: CELEBRATIONS AND FESTIVITIES

The aura of a festival is always of delight and varying degrees of contentment. A festival revolves around the notion of 'grandness' because of people's involvement in it and ultimately because it is contingent on the collective. The commemoration is of a recurrent event that has symbolic significance for everyone involved. This grandness is implicated in its existence across various timespans stretching in an integrated circuit of past, present and future; the past represented by an anticipation, the present by a celebration and the future by a reflective mode slowly evolving into a mode of anticipation. What this alludes to is an aura lingering and brimming with enjoyment. It is never melancholic and even if celebrated along macabre lines, it always gets inverted and unfolds as an enjoyable event.

In the context of migrants whose identities do not conform to an exclusive mainstream, it becomes disheartening because the festivals in the host society do not define who they are or celebrate their traditions. This is not to imply that there is a lack of participation in the celebration of these festivals, nor does this paper take an active stand against assimilation, which in all likelihood, happens at the cost of the minorities' identity. However, a notion eventually formulates that a migrant does not develop an associative stance towards these festivals. Due to their non-existence in the mainstream, migrants therefore feel the need to concoct an event that would quell their sense of hollowness and expunge them of their status as ineffectual minorities. The event is centred on drawing an assemblage, of conceiving an entity that will be accommodative of their differences yet at the same time be endearing enough to caress migrants at the level of intimacy. This becomes a sustaining link.

In the case of north-eastern migrants, the 'Northeast Festival' is based on a concoction of various regionalities, consolidated through an assertion that these cultures must be represented and recognised. This festival works on the idea of multiplicities rather than being a representation of only the 'dominant' cultures. This notion of

a dominant culture within a diasporic group emerges out of an exhibition of a majoritarian influence from amongst the demography of the migrants—in other words, of exclusively displaying cultures of the groups consisting of a larger ethnic population as compared to others; but apart from marking a presence and countering the prevailing festivals celebrated in the host society, the purpose of such festivals is primarily to celebrate a group and place identity (De Bres and Davis 2001) and to reproduce what the migrants are deprived of in that society.

One of the introductory festivals can be roughly traced back to *Octave* organised in 2006 by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. This festival has since become a regular affair. However, it is does not take place within a specific city but is spread throughout the country, designed conceptually as a travelling festival. Thus, the event is held at different locations, consisting not only of cosmopolitan cities but smaller towns as well, with the 2011 edition held at Solan, Himachal Pradesh. This festival stems from a desire to project the culture of the Frontier and cultivate knowledge about it. However, as a whole, this festival is more inclined towards promoting artists from the region, and, in that sense, for the migrants the festival becomes a concert. It is, however, not as interactive, and there is a felt distance between its producer and the receivers. As a whole, the festival is largely aimed at an audience not constitutive of the migrant population.

A more prominent festival is *The Northeast Festival*, an annual event in Delhi. This started in 2013 as a two-day celebration, however, with its growing popularity, the festival has been extended by another day. Arguably, it is based on the fulfilment of the aspirations established by *Octave*, but what adds to its exceptionality is that it is confined to a specific locale. This has supplemented its prestige and established its presence both among the migrants and other residents of the city. Its accomplishment is based on a bilateral connection, where the migrants are not just spectators but active participants. Moreover, this festival is not only an amalgamation of various cultures but also combines the traditional with the contemporary.

The festival is modelled on the intention of stimulating a journey across the Frontier. Therefore, the entire location is decorated with ornaments and structures that are representative of the eight states. But such decorations are not only placed to contextualise the festival; they also play an important role as emotional signifiers. For a migrant to see such adornments means a voyage that transfers them to a different place. However, what startles them is when the decorative pieces are unexpected, of the quotidian; for instance, areca nuts on display. For few, such exhibits become strong mnemonic devices. This culminates in a newer perspective towards the city, and the festival thereby becomes an intriguing phenomenon considering the spatial transformation and the signification that occurs through this.

The more recent editions of this festival have seen an increase in participation by individuals and sponsors. The festival is not only organised by migrants for migrants, but there is also a strong involvement of the State Governments. It is a sincere function, which tries to be as authentic and original as it can, and not be surrogated by the acts of appropriation by individuals not belonging to the community—of them reducing the vibrancy of the region to a mere performance, contaminated by inauthentic attires and motifs; their display can be encapsulated as a mere act of tokenism. Hence, *The Northeast Festival* sees the participation of individuals who come specifically from the Frontier for performances. Unlike *Octave,* the coming of the people for this festival is unique because it includes a plethora of individuals with varying backgrounds including cooking, entrepreneurship, as well as representatives of various departments of State Governments. The ultimate aim is doing justice not only to the region but also to the festival itself. Given the location where it is organised, the festival is able to simultaneously integrate a number of events that cater to different preferences. Here we notice the amalgamation of traditions occurring concurrently, where on one stage, a traditional folk performance can take place and on the other end, there can be a contemporary fashion show reinventing and revitalising the traditional.

However, an indirect critique of the festival is that it is just restricted to folk performances, music and fashion. The latter two, in a way reinforce the stereotypes about individuals from the region. As a response, the 2019 edition of the festival directed attention to oral narratives used broadly in an all-encompassing sense. There were sessions on literature, discussions on economic development and tourism prospects. There were also sessions where speakers discussed the politics of living in contested borderland areas, in which the atmosphere is wrapped in hostility and therefore an overwhelming sense of inconsistency.

Because of the notion of projecting all the cultures on a stage, the festival becomes an easy portal for the articulation of a judgemental position. Due to its celebrative mode, there is at times a lack of orderliness. Darpi, an undergraduate student from Arunachal Pradesh, emphasises the need 'to maintain proper decorum … [since] these are small windows on the basis of which people from [the] outside are going to judge us.'

Further, a regular aspect of the festival is its affiliation with exoticism. This arises from performances and the food but more so due to the State tourism departments. Their role is advertising and popularising the region to improve tourism prospects. However, there is an emphasis on the region being different from the rest of the country, popularly exemplified by opportunist phrases such as 'pristine beauty', 'land untouched by modernisation', or 'land with a strong culture'. In turn, this prompts the tradition of orientalising the region and its peoples, and the essence of the Frontier is ultimately defined by the three '"un" myths', that is, '"unchanged", "unrestrained", and "uncivilised"' (Etchner and Prasad quoted in McDuie-Ra 2012: 92). When individuals take the initiative to visit the tourist spots, their expectations do not meet reality, and they are left dissatisfied because they do not get a 'tribal tourism tour', and the natives that they meet are not within their articulated definitions and speculations. Further, while there has been an increase in tourism in the region, the amount of effort put in advertising is not matched by the level of management

at the tourist spots. There has been degradation in the region and a sense of disruption in the ordinary lives of the inhabitants.

There are other celebrations too which occur on a relatively smaller scale and are more confined to a specific audience. These happen at the university level on an annual basis. This is a comparatively recent phenomenon and ensues from the notion that despite the existence of a main cultural festival, cultures from the region are still an unfamiliar subject. Further, the reiteration of the festival re-emphasises the identities and cultures celebrated, especially in the context of heedless re-orientalism discussed in the preceding section. Apart from the activities and symbolism of the event, its importance also lies in the upliftment associated with its celebration. Unlike the grander festival, these are organised by students' associations, whose members are as young as 18. Organising a fest is never an easy task and achieving its goal involves a strenuous attachment, dedication and engagement. Beneficially, in this process, individuals learn methods and skills which are applicable and pertinent in a world immediately outside their surroundings including communication, management and coordination skills. It is an overwhelming situation because this level of interaction and learning would not have been as achievable had the students been in their native homes, where there is lesser exposure. However, despite the efforts, these festivals tend to be exclusive events with participation limited to members who are from the Frontier. A large number of students who are at their place of study are unresponsive to the celebrations or are mute spectators. Nitmem, a student enrolled in a law school, mentioned that this exclusivity goes against the purpose of educating and informing the larger crowd. Accordingly, to break from this, there have been successful attempts at broadening the concept of the festival and in doing so, focusing on certain aspects including organising food fests, music fests, panel discussions on certain issues and organising sessions on film appreciation. All of this is set against a strong backdrop representing the Frontier.

The idea of festivity can be reduced yet again to a more intimate space. However, such spaces operate on the basis of predefined conditions, and membership is therefore limited. These include groupings on the basis of religion, tribal ethnicities and belonging to the same State. Unlike the grandness of the observed festivals, these circumscribed celebrations are based on the condition of revelling in instances that are in consideration minute yet significantly enough, capable of collecting a people. The atmosphere that is created is not the same as that of festivity, but there is enjoyment nonetheless. Hence, they do not occur annually, but run on a regular basis as frequently as once a week. Whatever the reason for meeting, they are essential because these gatherings can weave a close-knit community and, in this manner, recapitulate the essence of belonging and the feeling of being at Home.

However, there are various other groups of migrants who do not fit into the essentialised groupings, such as those belonging to inactive sub-categories of the community or members of a populace that is small and limited, and therefore they can become insubstantial for the development of a community that will be structured on certain identity signifiers. As a matter of fact, when a migrant wants to be a part of a communitarian system, they are often left with a dismal feeling of being dispossessed.

In relation to this, the role played by *The Northeast Festival* becomes crucial because it acts as a substitute for what has not been achieved. On the basis of responses received for this study, it can be stated that a festival is of particular importance especially for first time migrants who are caught in an unsettling process of rearticulating their identity and who are still trying to locate their place within the parameters of the city. The newcomers are unlike other migrants who have grown accustomed to and are aware of their situation. For them, it is an alleviating factor to be aware of the existence and materialising of such events. This is also associated with a feeling of being protected, for instance, by seeing police booths [9] set up at the venue. At a larger

level, such festivals become a location for the honing of communitarian ethics, which in my re-interpretation and re-imagination signifies how a festival assists in the process of individuals to reconnect – to the idea of the home and the notion of the self. In its entirety, therefore, there is a strong undercurrent that besides the celebration, it is ultimately about a gathering of people, an anticipated event for reunions and the creation of newer ones. It is a festival of reaffirmation in the widest possible sense.

A *THALI*, A PLATE: EXPLOSIONS OF TASTES AND MEMORIES ON THE PALATE

Despite a high level of assimilation into the host society and the overall convenience of being there, many of the migrants experience a sense of hollowness that is inexplicable, yet implying everything from a sense of emptiness to a feeling of disjunction. In trying to expunge this feeling, migrants adapt through a process of engaging with a community where one feels at home, and as mentioned before, by participating in various fests. Yet in all of this, this inner chasm still persists. In this manner, I see this sentiment as being deeply individualistic. Whereas communities and fests are places to adapt on the outside, what can one do to adapt within oneself? Here, in such circumstances, food plays an important role in filling this void. Because of its consumption on a daily basis, it fulfils everything one feels deprived of. Hence, it is not just meant for eating, but is also a mode for expressing powerful values.

Migrants from the Frontier prefer and cherish cuisine that can be categorised as 'Northeast/north-eastern cuisine'. Like the classification of 'Northeast identity', this term is similarly tinted with ambiguity. However, when one is trying to confront the hegemonic dominance, such classifications overrule its questionable nature and transforms it into a convenient designator, consecutively eradicating the hierarchy. In this context, the hegemonic cuisine belongs to the group that

predominates, and its status enables the cuisine to be established as a component of the normative culture (Kikon 2015; Long 2018).

Nevertheless, what cannot be neglected in the process of cataloguing a cuisine is that, it is exceedingly difficult to place these culinary delights within a definitive classification. In the understanding of cuisine as both a style of cooking, as well as an edible reflection of the abundance of a particular region, the nature of Northeast cuisine can be illustrated as not only a commemoration to the harvest that is grown locally, but in the course of cooking, becomes an invocation, a gesture of reverence towards the flora and the fauna of the province. Northeast cuisine revolves around the simplicity of taste, and its elements are not subdued by the presence of other ingredients or spices. It is an explicit investment in the singularity of an ingredient's variegated flavour(s). Diana Zhimomi, the owner of Bamboo Hut—a restaurant inundated with warm hues located in Safdarjung Enclave—says that this cuisine 'is comfort food, which is reflective of the simplicity that most people in the region live with.' This idea of comfort food is associated within the space of the home, thus providing a consolation or a feeling of well-being (Locher et al. 2005). Therefore, this cuisine is linked to the idea of home and warmth. For Hage (2010), the relationship between home and food is important not only because it nourishes an individual being, but also because of the numerous implicit powers that lie beneath it, a few of which include the feeling of security, familiarity and a sense of communality. Consequently, in diasporic spaces, there is an increasing demand for homemade food.

The meaning of homemade food would not have become so symbolic had an individual been living in their native residence where the food would simply mean that there is a high level of nourishment and an effective sense of salubrity. However, the increase in the demand for such meals derives from the fact that there is an absence or a shift from such a position. For migrants, even when they are engaged in cooking the same meal, the significance is of difference—unlike cooking at home, which comes with attachments of love and the general ambience of the native habitat, their current situation involves

cooking in a house that is far removed from affection and very distant from the idea of a past home. Thereby in the transition in the conditions of cooking, the migrant is prompted to cook things that are familiar, so one can evoke and transfer the bowl of nourishment and comfort to one's current dwelling. In this shift, even insignificant things, which can be overlooked at home, can have newer added meanings in the new house (Stewart quoted in Mannur 2007; Sutton 2001).

However, apart from the shift in position, there is also strong reliance on memory. Cooking new meaning(s) is dependent on the infusion of location and memory. In this case, these memories are always associated with a sense of happiness. Even in situations of migrating due to an impending conflict or for other unfortunate reasons, the memories of the hearth will still be that of pleasantness because there will always be plates that shimmer of positivity, and are eventually relished. Contradictory to having traumatic memories, these selective and complacent memories are impelled by the concept of migrating with a bag not filled with impressions of bitterness, but brimming with optimism and delightful times. Thus, migrants rely on these to fuel their journey to and in the city. These memories are wide ranging from the favoured idea of home and family or a place and extending to other concepts, which are exemplified by a motley of responses from individuals who assisted in this research. For Ashok Mutum, co-founder of The Categorical Eat Pham, a Manipuri restaurant in New Delhi, these memories are specific to the winter season when lunch was followed by basking in the sun with the family who gathered around enjoying pomelo fruit. For Shunthingrin, what becomes evocative is the celebration of festivals during the winter and the sunrises at home. Memories also get aroused in abstruse terms, which includes grass for Swagat and the condition of restlessness that abounds in the city for Lijum. Additionally, memories can be dominating and have an overwhelming aspect, which Abhi calls a state that is indescribable.

In locating the significance of food, Janowski (2012: 177) argues that the reason why food creates such an impact is due to its 'indexical

status', a tacit awareness in which there is a 'particular resonance for [the] cultural, social, religious and [the] cosmological.' Hence, through consumption, one evokes a homeland and everything that exists in it. Cuadra's concept of 'palate memory' follows a similar trajectory because it discusses the idea of how 'the sensory and emotional aspects of food create an "intimate bond" that reflects remembrance of … [a] social and [a] cultural communion' (quoted in Abarca and Colby 2016: 5). Since food is associated with 'feelings', Mannur (2007: 15) asserts that it acquires a status that is both 'monolithic and mythological' (ibid.) and as such plays a distinctive role in the lives of migrants. Reflecting on the notion of intimacy, Mannur argues that food becomes 'a potent symbol for … ethnic integrity' (13). Most of the migrants I spoke to said that they bonded with each other through initial and lasting conversations that revolved around food, between the comforts associated with eating and the discomforts of not being able to eat.

Food is a priority and is a delectable affair. However, it is a challenging process especially when one is cooking an ethnic dish. It is taxing because despite stores selling products transported from the Frontier, it is usually difficult to procure correct and fresh ingredients required; one has to also consider the slight increase in prices occasionally making the ingredients less affordable. Secondly, time constraints and the fatigue make cooking laborious. In addition, because it exists in the realm of the marginal, the aroma that the food has becomes problematic because of its negative acceptance and as such becomes a constant site of contestation. Moreover, the notion of 'homemade' food is based on the idea that it is readily available for consumption, not requiring an individual to undertake any activity or effort to get the dish;[10] this is reflective of the state that one is being taken care of.

Considering these peculiarities, cooking ethnic dishes is not a viable option. Consequently, the role played by ethnic restaurants becomes essential, not only for the food that they serve but also for mitigating the problems faced by the migrants. As mentioned earlier,

this cuisine is situated in the notion of 'homemade' food and is a crucial aspect sustaining such restaurants. Restaurants imitate the role of the home and are locations of comfort and care. All the restaurateurs I interviewed asserted that the food they sold was entirely based on this concept, and as Poirei Yambem, co-proprietor of The Categorical Eat Pham, rightly said, this cooking was 'home centred'.

The notions of home and the tradition of warmth are evident in Nimtho, a Sikkimese restaurant tucked in Delhi's affluent locality of Greater Kailash. The food here is set against the theme of 'eating on everyday basis', and the cuisine is an amalgamation of the various regions that encircle the State. Hence the cuisine is described by Binita Chamling—the proprietor of the enterprise—as a 'beautiful combination of Nepalese, Tibetan, North Indian, Bengali and various other Sikkimese ethnic foods.' Nimtho signifies 'an invitation' not only to the food but also the hospitality, and becomes a window through which Sikkim is viewed and explored. At the outset, the restaurant has its ancestry in Organic Sikkim, an outlet store inaugurated in 2014, which was created to mirror the rise of the organic food movement in India and specifically that of Sikkim's involvement in this revolution. Although Nimtho is not organic per se, because not only is this approach uneconomical, but additionally, Binita adds, one cannot 'trust "trust" organic here [in Delhi] at this point of time'; the restaurant nonetheless shields from an unhealthy stereotype of outside food being detrimental, and instead presents food in an invigorating form. The restaurant aspires to appease all the senses and undeniably on crossing the threshold one is transposed to a different space as the ambiance is gentle, the music calming and the food as hearty as the region. Eventually, the feeling that one achieves is that of relaxation and comfort, a feeling of being at Home. With this concept, the owner mentions that this establishment is a monumental achievement, and for her, this restaurant is a gift to the city of Delhi—considering the tranquil spatial transit that occurs, this bestowal is absolutely appropriate especially in light of the city getting polluted and

contaminated throughout the year, and smothered by thick blankets of smog during Autumn.

Diana Zhimomi, the founder of Bamboo Hut, recounts her challenging journey in starting the restaurant not only due to financial terms, but also because of it was the first of such restaurants in the city. She gave birth to a cuisine and bred it so that it survived in a very hostile market where the cuisine was relegated to the margins and did not even exist in the culinary knowledge of the people. Since it serves Naga cuisine, there is an added problem—whether the restaurant serves 'dog meat'—and there have been instances where customers have actually asked this question. However, Diana says that owing to her background in customer service as she worked in a call centre, she has been successful in answering such questions and has been able to handle what she calls the 'awesome complaints'. Diana also mentions that the criticism that is received is directed and influenced by her gender; this is advantageous, she argues, because of the awareness that people show, and they also do not cross certain boundaries.[11] But I feel that her amiable and interactive personality is what helps her deal with the issue. She humorously adds that when people confront her about the smell, she counter questions and enquires about the Yamuna! This resolves the 'stinky debate'. For her, food is very important, and she argues that before engaging with a culture, food is one of the first things that an individual interacts with. Therefore, it becomes both a portal and a reinstatement of one's culture. Regarding the menu, Diana states that she wanted to introduce the familiar and not be very exploratory because even for Nagas, especially the younger generations with, as she says, a 'millennial upbringing', the cuisine can be quite intimidating.

Similarly, the menu is minimal at The Categorical Eat Pham—an animated restaurant quaintly settled in the heart of Humayunpur with an interior inadvertently setting a metropolitan vibe balanced by the rustic food served—but there is an insistence on the taste that is reflective of Manipuri cuisine. It is a menu curated out of years of experience and directly materialising out of a difficulty in

acquiring ingredients that are not as easily available in ethnic stores. Additionally, certain ingredients are seasonal making it tough to serve selective dishes. The owners, Ashok and Poirei, also spoke of how challenging it is to produce a rich and inclusive menu that best represents the State primarily because of the difference in cooking styles of the people between the Hills and the Plains of Manipur; besides they have not travelled extensively within the state to understand the variations in the cuisine. However, using the limited available ingredients, they are able to make epicurean delights. This is echoed by Poirei's stance that 'the lesser resources, the more resourceful one becomes.' Although the restaurant was started to fill a gap between the unavailability of Manipuri restaurants and the presence of a large migrant population, the status of the restaurant has changed of late. Now, the restaurant serves as a 'bridge' between the city and the home. Hence, when festivals are celebrated in Manipur, they are also celebrated here through specific foods that have a strong resonance with the festival. For instance, during the *Rath Yatra,* they offer *khichdi*—popularly referred to as *khechri*—on a lotus leaf. This festival sees the participation of a large number of customers who are missing out on the festival at home. The restaurant is also expanding from just an eating joint to one for observing the culture of the State with promotions and exhibitions of literature and other things. In this manner, the restaurant has become a space for the creation of a little homeland, and a 'safer neighbourhood' (Marte 2012: 299).

Northeast cuisine, however, is not just limited to being traditional and remaining static in form and taste. It can blend in an atmosphere not necessarily related to the home, but also in an outside and casual setting. Along the lines of cosmopolitanism, there is a correlation in the city with the bourgeoning of the cuisine in an *au courant* manner, advocating it in ways fantastic and unimaginable. A pioneer in the field is Tanisha Phanbuh, alias Miss Tribal Gourmet, who infuses the flavours of the cuisine in popular dishes, or into 'tapa style food'. From being a contestant in food reality shows such as *Femme Foodies* (2017) and *MasterChef India* (2019), Tanisha is proficient in the art

of reinvention. Unlike the other contestants, who were more focused on influences from the West, her cooking capitalised on looking inwards and acknowledging the elegance of the region that she comes from. Through this, the essence of the cuisine was brought into a national limelight. However, she argues that although there has been a metamorphosis, she is very meticulous in highlighting the flavours and to ensure that the concept of the original dishes is not annihilated altogether. She focuses on the food and the taste that constitutes a dish in lieu of its form. At the same time, she is very attentive to introducing the flavours in moderation, considering that this cuisine requires acquiring a taste or developing the palate for it. In addition, she adds that the success of the enterprise is due to its storytelling because it is very 'important to feel a connect ... to be able to appreciate [a dish].' Hence, her designated title fits the theme, as it weaves stories relating to the cuisine and accordingly becomes educational as well as empowering.

All the above restaurateurs do not have a background in the hospitality industry, and they never intended to take this route. The restaurants were however developed from this act of migrating and a realisation that there was a void when it came to satiating one's hunger.[12] Hence, the increase in ethnic restaurants in host societies is out of a failure to meet such demands (Basu quoted in Kershen 2002). The restaurateurs are not professionally trained in cooking but have acquired the skills through informal observations and by taking part in the process of cooking when they were growing up. But it is ultimately passion that keeps them engaged in this field. Their method of cooking is based on instinct and a strong reliance on memories that eventually produce the taste of 'homemade' cooking.

An objective of such establishments is the pursuit of educating the host society about their cuisine and to break prejudiced stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding it. One misunderstanding that exists is that the cuisine is only of one type. Studying Indian restaurants in the United States, Ray (2014) shows how in the earlier half of the 20th century, people were not aware of the existence of differences,

and hence categorised all Indian restaurants under one term, 'Hindu'. Similarly, when individuals consume Northeast cuisine, they assume that the cuisine of all the eight states is the same. Due to the considerable amount of availability of Naga restaurants, the food served in them becomes the definition of Northeast cuisine. Subsequently, this leads to other restaurants serving different cuisines and reiterating that there is more to Northeast cuisine. However, the availability of restaurants from the states is not equal, with a considerable number being from Nagaland, Manipur and Assam, while there are only a few restaurants that serve other states' cuisine or they do not exist at all. This demonstrates the size of the migrant populace from each State as supported by statistics compiled by Marchang (2012).

Additionally, the restaurants have reformulated the attributes of the cuisine. For instance, Ashok and Poirei are clear that they will not serve *momos*, despite it being popularly linked to the imagination of the cuisine and their understanding that it will be profitable when sold. For them, what is crucial is adhering to authenticity, and *momo*s do not belong to Manipuri cuisine! On the contrary, Binita is very proud to include them in her menu, and it is a speciality of her restaurant; the filling is meaty and sapid, and is delicately wrapped to maintain the form yet diffusing immediately on consumption. The *momos* are supplemented by an equitable balance of a placid, clear broth and a punch of fresh, fiery *chutney*. For her, it brings fond memories of home and a recollection of togetherness in cooking the dish. At a symbolic level the introduction of the dish speaks of collectivity and remembrance. Following an exploratory path, Tanisha serves dishes which are not innate to the region and the cuisine per se, but that have become entrenched in the cultural and collective memory of the people. For instance, fruit cake for dessert. This is drawn from the fact that in Shillong, during Christmas, there is an unusually high production of cakes, and over the years, cakes have become a part of the tradition of consumption. Hence, serving it can unexpectedly trigger memories of home and a feeling of festivity. To that effect, the purpose of restaurateurs omitting, including and expanding

certain dishes is done for redefining the cuisine, and significantly for reinforcing the familiar and stimulating the remembrance of home.

Notably, all the restaurateurs and the other individuals whom I had interacted with confirmed that their mothers played a vital role in their lives and were responsible for them learning to cook. A mother enjoys a position of prestige, transmitting all forms of creativity and influence. The pre-eminent rationale for such an association is however due to the reality of a deep-rooted patriarchy although it is assumed that there is lesser gender disparity and discrimination in the Frontier as compared to the rest of the country. As a result, there is not only division of labour, but also the division of space according to which activities are allocated on the basis of gender (Ardner quoted in Parveen 2017). Hence, nearly all the cooking is done by the mother, or by women, and men seldom prepare food save for occasional events. Thus, it is culturally imbibed that there is a familiar connection between the mother and food.

The role of the mother is magnificently formulated in Miriam Meyers' *A Bite off Mama's Plate* (2001). Meyers' argument is that notwithstanding the condition of the individuals being removed from their economic, social and geographic roots, mothers are nonetheless able to build bonds with their daughters. This is accomplished through the basis of food, which thereafter culminates in establishing stronger connections. She is, however, conscious that this intentionally asserted claim might not hold true for all women. She introduces the idea of a food heritage in which mothers transmit food legacies and memories to their daughters, thus augmenting this lineage. Parveen (2017: 57) similarly acknowledges the importance of the mother figure and the bonds that are subsequently established with other women. She analyses these by employing 'Irigaray's two-dimensional notion of vertical and horizontal relationships that pass down knowledge between mother and daughter and [between other women],' and argues that this transmission creates a community where there is remembrance and empowerment.

While 'food heritage' is about the relationship between mothers and daughters, in the context of this paper, it also includes how information and knowledge is passed down not only through the female line of descent but by being inclusive of everybody. This is very crucial because it is a transmission ensuring an attachment between the two entities and additionally secures the continuance of a genealogy, a tradition. Therefore, the mother ascends to the status of a matriarch and is revered as a source of expertise. For migrants, there is a devoted reliance on the idea of a mother's cooking which can either take the form of imitation or inspiration, or both. Additionally, when one is cooking an unfamiliar dish *in absentia*, the first point of reference is the mother and the ensuing telephonic conversations foster a transmission thus accentuating orality, remembrance and exaltation.

The idea of food is not only about consumption and of being a source of internal satisfaction, but embodied within it are implications of remembrance, of group integrity and importantly of political assertion. Further, it also plays the role of the pacifier through which forms of inter-ethnic disagreements can be quelled.[13] At the same time, it serves as a portal through which a cuisine is both defined and re-defined, which correlatively demolishes existing stereotypes. Thus, food is quintessentially an admixture of ingredients and an assortment of implications.

AT THE END OF A MEAL: SATIATION AND CESSATION

Because of the construct of the home and the various associations that one establishes with it, a shift from one's native place is always a difficult task. Adding to the difficulties is the fact that the host society is not accommodative and is characterised by constant strife in claiming one's sense of individuality; this assertion is by the group that is rendered as minor or marginal.

However, this flow of migration has reassurance in that it is not passive despite being depreciated by the host society. The movement

is an active battle trying to demolish the prevalent hegemonic cultures and hierarchies. Although the road to reclamation is agonising, progress is being made and is firmly establishing milestones.

The creation and assertion of a diaspora will enable the presence of a more resolute picture in relation to the framework of India. This will lead to the differences that constitute the eight states becoming more visible and lead to an acceptance of their differences. This is a formidable force because for a very long time, the Frontier has been absent from discourses articulated at the Centre, and when being represented, the Frontier has had only one voice. Now, the Sisters have multifarious voices, and India ought to listen. The diaspora also becomes conducive to indigenous identity formation (Kikon and Karlsson 2019), whereby unlike previously where one struggled to integrate with the definition of India, with this formation migrants are able to proclaim their indigeneity; what this diasporic formation proposes is that this difference should be embraced.

Within the diaspora, the reproduction of festivals and the consumption of ethnic food become a priority and because of the appositeness of memories (which is recurrent and perennial) it metamorphizes into a new level of signification. It is at this juncture that the crux of the epigraph is appreciated: to facilitate the remembrance of one's *tre* (roots), one has to be immersed in the process of partaking in the acts of consumption and of revelling in festivities; this actively sustains the link. This remembrance acts as 'intimations' (Hage 2010: 423) of the home, and thus there is an exemplification of the notions of comfort, power and care.

Because of its consumption on a diurnal basis, food is germane to an active assertion of one's individuality. As such, through eating, one constructs ethnicity and performs it (Ray 2014). Further, with the passage of time, the reproduction of festivals breeds a robust ground for a political posture. Accordingly, the blending of reproduction and performativity facilitates a condition of hedonism (here, migrants relish the idea of the home) and a political stance, along with the cultivation of a diasporic structure.

An admirable element of this structure is that even when there is a change—of location and festivities—migrants arrive at contentment. This change is more salient when it comes to the taste of food because undeniably the shift in the cooking environment transmutes to the end product; for instance, despite it being the same dish, the cooking of smoked pork over firewood, when cooked differently, affects the overall flavour. Albeit this, a note of consolation comes from an awareness that there is a dearth of food [14] and of an understanding that it is difficult to reproduce a dish in the condition of being away from home. What is momentous is the aspiration to replicate the home, and therefore all and any effort is truly cherished. This acceptance of an altered form does not disturb the original idea and does not diffuse the taste because of a reference enabled through frequent contact between the home and the city of residence.

Although a major section of this paper talks of the importance of food, and despite discussing the cuisine at length, it is ironic that there is very limited mention of the assorted dishes which fall under this category. I contend that in this deliberate action of exclusion, I am decisively not falling prey to the politics of prioritising one dish over many others, which would establish the positionality of the dishes in the food hierarchy. On the other hand, considering the expanse of research possibilities on the cuisine per se, an exploration can be suggested to extensively travel across the Frontier to academically construct a catalogue of dishes.

In the diaspora, the kitchen becomes an important site because it leads to the obliteration of gender constructs. The restaurateurs affirmed that although gender plays an important role in their lives, they look past it to focus on the food. Though historically the kitchen reinforces gender, this can be reversed into a space that is genderless. Likewise, through the cooking of dishes, they are performing ethnicity and empowering individuals who consume it. Ultimately, it is not just a passion and love for food, but a political position for reclaiming a space.

NOTES

1. This is a popular *Pnar* song, which loosely translates to 'For Roots shouldn't be uprooted – / Howbeit the drift of the ground'. This song is frequently played during *Chad Pliang* or the plate dance. The dance is symbolic because it is exclusive to the tribe and is considered an essential quality of being a *Pnar*. Additionally, the finesse needed for balancing the plates while dancing signifies the notion of balance, and at a larger level preserves the harmony between respecting one's roots and flourishing in different locales.
2. I have borrowed this term from Lisa Lau's article, 'Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and the Development of Orientalism by Orientals' (2009). She argues that in South Asian literature the discourse on Orientalism is propagated not by Occidentals but by diasporic Orientals. The shift in location prompts Orientals to adopt the practices of the Occident.
3. In this scientific study, the authors examine how the odour of wine is largely dependent on what the respondent experiences. In their research, they found that the participants affirmed that the wine that they were drinking was red wine. However, the wine was not red but a white wine that had been artificially coloured. Thus, they conclude that a perceptual illusion occurs, and it influences the participants' judgement and reasoning.
4. Unlike Tribalism, which connotes a form of empowerment, an identity and a category that is embraced, I use this word because of its close cultural association with being a Tribal and being a savage, where despite the former being 'cultured', Tribals are categorised as being different and barbaric. The ideology of savagism is pertinent for individuals who are not in the purview of being tribal, that is, they believe that Tribals can only be seen through the lens of them being as such.
5. Worn by Khasi women, usually when an individual moves out of the home.
6. *OED* defines it as 'an image … typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations.' The humour derives from the fact that the image is akin to the words being used to describe it, and how the emotion of the meme is accurately encapsulated within this correlation. This can also be attributed to its satirical nature. At times, the basis of such an existence is making fun of the concerned party. The infamous meme in the context of the paper is an image in which four students are on a bed, with the student belonging to the 'general category' studying; the depicted impracticably referring to an uncountable stack of books. The student belonging to the 'OBC' category has one book and the

rest are sleeping: https://ahseeit.com/hindi/?qa=2619/general-vs-obc-vs-sc-st-meme

7. The work is influential as the authors give an exhaustive explanation. Thus, the assertion of a diaspora that my paper makes should be read keeping in mind this work.
8. Zhang looks at transrelation not as a process 'to find equivalence in different cultures for substitution, but to expand the space of continuity in which various combinations and configurations of relations can be formed.' (130)
9. This booth is of the Special Police Unit for the North-Eastern Region started by Delhi Police. Although this unit has been in existence for quite a few years, its installation during the festival ensures that people become more aware of its functions; it is also used for introducing its work to newcomers.
10. The proclaimed statement is overtly romantic and obliterates the individuality of the cook; it must be noted, furthermore, that the cooks are mostly women, and are often disregarded for their effort. The food is thus segregated from the creator, that is, it exists in isolation, merely as an item for consumption. However, in the diaspora the idea of 'homemade food' means the food prepared at home by various family members. Therefore, the correlation between gender and food gets obliterated. Rather than being secluded, the cook is credited. As such, migrants structure their association with food through a remembrance, such as 'food as my mother/father made it'. Moreover, the effortless action ensues from the dish being prepared by other individuals and not the migrant per se.
11. What is implied by Diana's statement is that men are more vocal in their criticism. In the interview, she mentioned of an instance where a group of drunk men came and created an uproar of complaints at the restaurant. She declared however, that part of her ability to resist to such disturbances is already embedded in her gender—for her, the basis of being female, refrains men from crossing a 'certain limit' (*sic*).

    [Note: This 'certain limit' is left to the inference of the reader.]
12. Rather than the literal meaning of craving something to eat, the sensation of hunger that I infer refers to the hunger of food that reminds the migrant of one's home. Furthermore, it is a hunger of the homeland and all its 'subjective' elements that constitute it. I use the word subjective because, for each migrant, the meaning and the composition of the homeland is different; this hunger is of finding one's roots, of unearthing routes that will cultivate the bond between the migrant and the concept of home.

13. Just because the notion of 'Northeast' is evocative of the idea of unity, it does not imply that differences do not arise. The kind of ethnic strife that occurs in the Frontier is present in the city as well though its intensity is not as strong. I do not detail this matter, considering that it is a different topic relevant for an analysis on its own. Yet, I allude to a video by Vishal Langthasa, which is about two individuals from the Frontier and how they initially bonded. Yet, as the conversation between them ensues, they start having differences relating to their ethnicities, revealing contestations about issues that are very prevalent in the Frontier. However, the tension dissipates when the topic of food is brought up, thus underlining the role played by food in bringing communities together and eliminating the idea of conflict:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IZ3197w9k
14. The dearth of food in this context refers to the ingredients that are difficult to procure in order to make an ethnic dish; it also relates to the arduous task implicated in the preparation of a dish, hence persuading individuals to eat at restaurants. Yet, even here, menus can be limited and cannot fulfil the whole experience of being at Home.

INTERVIEWS

Ashok Mutum and Poirei Yambem (Proprietors, The Categorical Eat Pham), in discussion with the author, New Delhi, 27 September 2019.

Binita Chamling (Proprietor, Nimtho), in discussion with the author, New Delhi, 1 October 2019.

Diana Zhimomi (Proprietor, Bamboo Hut Restaurant), in discussion with the author, New Delhi, 26 September 2019.

Tanisha Phanbuh (Creative Director, Together at 12th, Le Méridien), in discussion with the author, Gurgaon, 24 September 2019.

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