

# Dwelling in Transition: An autoethnographic reflection on researching internal migration while living it

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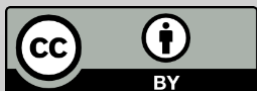
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## Abstract

*This article explores the convergence of academic research and personal history through an autoethnographic account of conducting a PhD on internal migration and masculinity in India, while simultaneously navigating transnational academic migration as an Indian scholar based in the United Kingdom. Drawing on feminist and sensory methodologies, this article examines how the researcher's lived experiences of childhood mobility, linguistic fragmentation and cultural fluidity shaped her approach to fieldwork and interpretation. By reflecting on the embodied dimensions of researching masculinity within feminised domestic spaces and considering memory and displacement as both data and method, this article argues for a situated, affective epistemology of migration. It suggests that the act of researching migration in itself is a recursive, migratory process, one that blurs the lines between inquiry and inheritance, between distance and belonging.*

**Keywords:** autoethnography; AE; internal migration; reflexivity; masculinity; embodied methodology; home; India; memory

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## Introduction

I have been migrating longer than I have been writing about migration.

To research migration in India is to trace movement through a landscape so vast, so internally diverse, that each relocation can feel like crossing into another country. India's 28 states and 8 union territories are marked by their own languages, dialects, scripts, culinary traditions, dress codes, religious practices, climate zones and rhythms of life. A train journey from Baramulla in Jammu and Kashmir to Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu takes one not just across 3,000 kilometres, but across cultural worlds, from the Himalayan temperate air and pheran-clad winters to coastal humidity and the fragrance of sambar rising from kitchen courtyards.<sup>i</sup> These are not minor variations; they constitute shifts in embodied habitus, demanding recalibration of speech, gesture and sensory expectations each time one arrives in a new place.

Internal migration in India is often narrated through rural-to-urban economic movement, but there exists another, less examined form: the internal transfer system within Indian government sectors, particularly the armed forces, civil administration and public enterprises. In these systems, employees are periodically reassigned to new postings, often every two to three years, as part of institutional policy. For military families like mine, this meant an unbroken cycle of packing, moving and resettling across cantonments; planned, self-contained enclaves that replicate certain infrastructures but remain deeply inflected by the cultural, linguistic and ecological particularities of their host regions. A transfer from Ferozepur in Punjab to Tenga Valley in Arunachal Pradesh is more than just a change of address; it includes entering a new linguistic terrain, learning different modes of hospitality, adapting to altered notions of public space and encountering unfamiliar gender norms in everyday life.

Growing up within this cycle of transfers, I came to understand movement not as an exception but as a structuring principle of life. Homes were assembled and disassembled with military efficiency, yet each bore the trace of its provisionality; curtains hastily tailored for temporary windows, kitchens reorganised to suit regional vegetables, a checkered patterned sofa set in every new drawing/ dining room like a quiet witness to continuity. This lived experience forms the spine of my research: an exploration of internal migration as a layered, often invisible process of cultural negotiation, material improvisation and affective labour.

In this article, I focus on the lives of occupationally mobile Indian men (government officials, public sector workers, traditional sector workers and truck drivers) whose movements, like those of my own family, unfold within national borders yet demand continual acts of cultural translation.<sup>ii</sup>

By situating their narratives within feminist and sensory methodological frameworks, and by drawing on my autoethnographic positionality, I seek to examine how internal migration in India produces its own 'soft borders;' lines that are felt, navigated and redrawn through practices of everyday life.

### **Migration as Inheritance**

I did not migrate for economic survival. I did not migrate due to conflict, nor in search of asylum. My migrations were state-sanctioned, cyclical and neatly scheduled. And yet, they were disorienting in ways that evade easy categorisation.

As the daughter of a military officer in India, I lived a life of constant relocation: every two or three years, a new posting, a new school, a new city. From Srinagar in the North to Arunachal Pradesh in the East, to Rajasthan in the West and from cantonments nestled in mountain mists to dusty barracks in the plains. We lived not on a map, but on a timeline of impermanence. In retrospect, it is no surprise that I now study migration. The question was never 'if' I would; it was 'when.'

Scholars of migration often reserve the term for transnational movement or large-scale displacement. But recent literature on internal migration has complicated these boundaries. In India alone, over 450 million people are estimated to be internal migrants according to the Census of India (2011), most of whom move for work, education or marriage. My own movement, while not precarious in material terms, bears emotional resemblance to these dislocations. I was uprooted from friends, languages, routines and cultures. I arrived again and again in new places where I had to relearn belonging. Each new home was both a repetition and a rupture.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'habitus,' the deeply ingrained habits and dispositions shaped by one's social environment, offers a useful lens here. My habitus was one of transition. I internalised a mode of adaptability that blurred the line between who I was and who I needed to become in each new city. There was no singular 'mother tongue,' no neighbourhood I could point to and say, 'I am from here.' Instead, there were cadences of speech that shifted subtly with each location, clothes that adapted to school codes, mannerisms that mirrored those around me.

This cultivated a form of 'translocal' sensibility, one that geographers like Brickell and Datta (2011) argue is often overlooked in urban migration discourse. Translocality acknowledges the layered, multi-sited nature of belonging, how identity is forged not in one place, but across the palimpsest of many. In this way, my earliest experiences with migration

were not marked by a single event, but by a slow sedimentation of minor departures.

I remember arriving in Punjab, aged 15, after leaving behind a school in Rajasthan. The new school had different greetings, colder mornings, girls who braided their hair differently. I did not yet have the vocabulary of a scholar, but I understood what Homi Bhabha (1994) would later describe as the 'in-between space,' a liminal zone where one is not quite here nor there. My childhood was an apprenticeship in that zone.

As I began formal research on migration and masculinity, I realised that these early displacements had trained me to notice the smallest shifts in space and gesture. I could read the discomfort in how a migrant worker folded his shawl before speaking or how he arranged his tiffin on the cement floor in his submitted photographs. My childhood migration had tuned me to material registers of survival where the way identity is not only spoken, but worn, held and folded.

My own family's material culture was also deeply mobile. My mother, whose ancestors migrated from Bengal but who was born in Uttar Pradesh, carried saris that no longer matched the climate we lived in. She kept prayer books in multiple scripts. My father, from Uttarakhand, did not teach us Kumaoni, his mother tongue. It was not practical, he expressed.<sup>iii</sup> We needed Hindi and English.<sup>iv</sup> Something portable, he argued. Something that travelled well. So we became fluent in forgetting, too.

Over time, each posting was marked not only by a change in residence but by a shift in textures, colours and domestic arrangements. A new rank for my father meant repainting the heavy wooden or metal trunks that carried our clothes, linens and winter blankets, their corners dented from decades of postings. The name, stencilled neatly in white paint, stayed the same; only the rank beside it was altered to match regulations, each update leaving faint brush marks over the ghost of the previous title. These trunks, stacked in corners of transient homes, were more than storage, they were travelling billboards of our movements, bearing the official traces of where we had been and who my father was at each stage.

Migration here was not only physical, but it was also intellectual, cultural and affective. It was a process of physically imbibing the environment, borrowing fragments of local culture from each place and absorbing them into our household routines. Objects were packed and unpacked with ritualistic precision, each carton a mental as well as material container, its labels silently mapping the country. By looking at a participant's domestic material objects (decorative wall pieces, a specific wooden furniture, a collection of seashells or pinecones), one could identify the region they had lived in. These belongings became quiet archives of migration, revealing

(sometimes more than words could) the routes taken and the cultures encountered. The household, in this case, functioned as a migratory platform (both physically mobile and mentally expansive) divulging our previous geographies whenever we met someone new. It is in this intimate layering of place into object and object into memory that my understanding of migration as a methodological condition began to take form.

Ahmed (1999) reminds us that migration is not only about movement, but about the affective economies that frame who belongs and who does not. Even as a child with privilege, I felt the sting of being an outsider in my own country, my accent too soft, my surname unfamiliar in the West, my skin too light in the South. Migration, I learned, is not always about geography. Sometimes, it is about the distance between selves. These distances return in the research I do now, but they also inhabit how I do it. As a scholar, I understand the literature: I can cite Castles and Miller (2009), Schiller (2010), Vertovec (2007), but as a woman who has lived through cumulative displacement, my tools are also intuition, memory, sight. I approach fieldwork with a sensorial attunement, what Pink (2009) calls 'sensory ethnography.' I note how a migrant arranges his bedroll. I watch for what is not said in interviews. I remember the embarrassment of being new and the burden of translation. These are not biases to be eliminated; they are epistemologies.

In this way, my migrations are not just prelude to my research, they are the method.

### **Language, Silence and Home Become Autoethnographic Fragments**

I was not raised in a single language.

Hindi was spoken in school, shaped by the softness of hilly consonants and the formality of textbooks. English was the language of aspiration, taught, tested and tightly woven into the promise of upward mobility. Bengali, my mother tongue, came to me in threads: in lullabies, in anger, in half-remembered nursery rhymes my mother sang while doing laundry.<sup>v</sup> Kumaoni, my father's native tongue, never entered our house. These languages did not form a hierarchy. They formed a constellation, scattered, glowing, unevenly remembered. I learned early on to shift between them depending on where I was, who I was with and what I needed to conceal or reveal. This linguistic fluidity became a kind of armour, but also a haunting. What happens to a sense of home when the words for it are unstable?

This instability of language is more than an autobiographical quirk; it is an epistemic condition that shaped how data was collected, interpreted and remembered. Outlined in a later section expands on how linguistic flexibility sits alongside other embodied dispositions (sensory recall, spatial memory and migratory habitus) that informed the reflexive register of this research. My shifts between Hindi and English during fieldwork were not neutral translations but enactments of Bourdieu's (1991) claim that language is a form of symbolic capital, always already marked by histories of movement and structures of power. The pauses, tonal hesitations and even strategic silences in interviews were as much a part of this 'memory work' as the spoken word. Simply put, language instability became both data and method; an affective undercurrent that ran through the narratives I gathered and the ones I told about myself.

Language, as Bourdieu (1991) reminds us, is never neutral. It carries social capital, marks of origin and a traceable geography. In fieldwork, I was always aware of which version of Hindi I was using. My accent had been reshaped by years of movement. I did not sound 'purely' North Indian, nor did I reflect the inflections of those I interviewed (men whose regional dialects were thick with work, distance and memory). I was intelligible but recognisably not from here. In many ways, I never had a 'from here.'

Silence became its own strategy. Many of the men I spoke with, those who had left families behind, described home without naming it. They referred to it obliquely: '*Wahan jo tha...*' ('Over there it was...'), '*Jab chhoda tha tab...*' ('When I left...'). These silences were not absences; they were saturated with grief, resignation and longing. They reminded me of my own family's tendency to skip over what was left behind each time we moved, photographs that were never unpacked, names of neighbours never spoken again. I have come to understand silence as part of the methodology. It is, as Mazzei (2007) argues, not the opposite of voice, but a form of data in itself. What is not said and what resists articulation, often reveals the deepest fissures in experience. The home, as a concept, is often romanticised in migration research, yet for many of the men I interviewed, it was a site of nostalgia, incompleteness or strategic forgetting. For me too, it remains an idea rather than a location.

This autoethnographic fragmenting of language and home resists narrative closure. I cannot offer a tidy conclusion. What I can offer instead are traces, scattered across childhood houses, across rooms where fieldwork was conducted, across the long pauses between a question and an answer. These fragments do not reduce understanding; they demand a different kind of attention. Perhaps that is what the migratory life teaches us best, not how to find home, but how to notice when it briefly flickers into being, in a voice, in a gesture, in a silence you recognise as your own.

## **The Academic Gaze: Researching masculinity and migration in India**

Conducting ethnographic research on male migrant workers in India as a woman researcher presents a complex interplay of gender dynamics, insider-outsider positionality and the embodiment of academic inquiry. This section explores my experiences of navigating male-dominated spaces, reflecting on how personal history and scholarly engagement intertwine.

My fieldwork often brought me into the homes of migrant men, spaces that, in much of the literature, have traditionally been understood as feminine domains. The home is commonly read as a site of care, emotion and reproduction, associated with women's labour and presence (McDowell, 1999; Massey, 1994). Yet, in the case of my own research on occupationally mobile men, it is often these men who temporarily inhabit these domestic spaces in the absence of their families, thereby reconstituting the home as a masculine space. Entering these rooms, rented tenements, makeshift shared dwellings, I became acutely aware of the layered spatial and gendered tensions. As a woman researcher stepping into what was once feminised space but is now reshaped through male use and presence, I had to negotiate my own positionality not by asserting my femininity, but by bracketed withdrawal.

To observe masculinity in this space, I often felt compelled to make myself marginal to it, to remove the interpretive lens of femininity and, instead, read the room as a domain of masculine negotiation. This was not about gender-neutrality, but about shifting perceptual modes where I was studying the arrangement of objects, the ways in which men carved privacy, asserted control or marked the domestic as transient. These interiors (modest, fluid, deeply lived) became stages for masculine identity performance. My presence did not disrupt a homosocial space as much as it observed the performance of masculinity within a space usually coded as 'female'. This inversion required methodological and emotional recalibration.

Drawing on Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, I observed how migrant men negotiated their identities through displays of strength, stoicism and economic provision. These performances were not monolithic; they varied across contexts and were often in flux, influenced by factors such as caste, class and regional backgrounds. For instance, a truck driver from Haryana (Central India) might emphasise his role as a provider, while a Textile worker from Jammu (Northern India) might highlight his technical skills, reflecting regional variations in masculine ideals.

My positionality as a woman researcher afforded me a unique vantage point. While it posed challenges in terms of access and trust-building, it also facilitated deeper conversations about vulnerabilities and aspirations. Men often shared narratives of longing, failure and hope; stories that might have been withheld from male researchers due to the pressures of conforming to masculine norms. This aligns with the insights of Pande (2017), who emphasises the relational performances of masculinities in migratory contexts.

However, this positionality was not without its complexities. There were moments when my presence was met with suspicion or misinterpretation. Navigating these situations required reflexivity and adaptability and acknowledging the power dynamics at play and striving to mitigate them through ethical research practices. This echoes the views of England (1994), who reflects on the challenges of conducting fieldwork in gendered and racialised contexts. Moreover, my own experiences of internal migration during childhood informed my empathetic engagement with participants. Having navigated multiple cultural landscapes, I could relate to feelings of displacement and the quest for belonging. This personal history supplemented my understanding of the emotional dimensions of migration, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of participants' narratives.

In synthesising these experiences, it becomes evident that the researcher's identity is not a detached backdrop but an active component of the research process. Embracing this reflexivity enhances the depth and authenticity of ethnographic inquiry, particularly in studies of migration and masculinity where personal and collective identities are continually negotiated.

Researching masculinity and migration in India as an autoethnographic project requires confronting the intersecting asymmetries of gender, mobility and academic authority (Connell, 1995; Datta, 2016). My position as a researcher (marked by my own history of internal mobility through my father's government transfers) allowed an embodied sensitivity to the rhythms of relocation, yet also positioned me as an outsider to the intensely gendered experiences of male migrants whose leisure, work and domestic practices unfolded in spaces not designed for permanence (Silvey, 2004; Ahmed, 2004).

The 'academic gaze' in this context is not neutral; it is entangled in the social scripts of respectability, protection and observation, particularly when interviewing truckers in roadside dhabas, government clerks in temporary quarters or potters in makeshift settlements.<sup>vi</sup> While migration theory has often privileged transnational movements (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Brettell, 2003), the layered complexities of internal migration

(negotiating linguistic boundaries, caste geographies, state bureaucracies and urban-rural tensions) remain under-acknowledged in masculinity studies.

In the Indian context, internal migration carries many of the dislocations and negotiations seen in cross-border migration but without the same legal or scholarly recognition. In my fieldwork, the truck driver's cabin became both workplace and home; the railway clerk's quarters bore traces of three different cities in its furnishings; the tailor's rented room in a bustee housed religious objects from his natal village alongside new urban purchases.

To situate these experiences in dialogue with broader migration and masculinity literature, the following masculinity and migration matrix (**Table 1**) maps key theoretical and empirical contributions, distinguishing between international and internal migration scholarship. This mapping clarifies where my work is positioned by also highlighting how the Indian internal migration context adds layers of cultural negotiation and masculine identity-making absent from much of the global literature.

By juxtaposing international and internal migration scholarship, the matrix clarifies how the Indian internal migration experience both 'converges with' and 'departs from' existing masculinities literature. The absence of legal border crossings does not diminish the intensity of cultural, linguistic and bureaucratic negotiations, nor the reshaping of masculine identity that occurs in these spaces.

In my fieldwork, internal migrants navigated what could be called 'invisible borders,' each demanding affective labour and social performance. This positioning also invites a reframing of masculinity in migration research: rather than viewing men solely as economic actors or patriarchal beneficiaries, my data reveals them as constantly recalibrating selves, managing vulnerability and care under conditions of structural dislocation.

The academic gaze, when turned upon this internal migration context, must therefore be attuned to both the 'macro-structures' of labour, state policy and caste-geography, and the 'micro-practices' of everyday life including, the rearranging of belongings, the sharing of leisure moments in tea stalls and the quiet preservation of natal languages in conversation. Moving forward, this framework will connect into the next section's discussion of 'Methodology as Memory', linking theoretical debates to the lived, sensory and mnemonic textures of my own field encounters.

Migration Type	Author and Work	Geographic Focus	Core Focus	Masculinity Lens	Relevance to This Study
International	Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994) <i>Gendered Transitions</i>	Mexico-USA	How migration reshapes family roles and gender dynamics	Migration destabilises male authority, demands renegotiation of care and labour	Offers comparative grounding for understanding shifts in Indian men’s familial roles
	Connell, R. W. (1995) <i>Masculinities</i>	Global (Theoretical)	Hegemonic masculinity and its relational hierarchy	Masculinities are contingent on context, power and mobility	Anchors theoretical framing of masculine identity shifts under mobility
	Ticktin, M., & Ong, A. (2005) in <i>Global Assemblages</i>	Transnational, refugees, borders	Governance, ethics and embodied politics	State regulation intersects with masculinity and bodily control	Useful for parallels between state-mediated migration regimes internationally and within India
Internal	Brettell, C. B. (2003) <i>Anthropology and Migration</i>	Rural-to-urban, intra-national	Cultural identity, labour and kinship in internal moves	Men reconstruct identity in response to urban marginality	Provides precedent for reading internal migration as culturally transformative
	Evans, T., & Thomas, R. (2020)	India, China, Africa	Social mobility, masculinity and patriarchy under rural-urban migration	Loss of control, insecurity and renegotiated norms	Strong alignment with my data on precarity and masculine vulnerability
	Silvey, R. (2004) <i>Power, Difference and Mobility</i>	Indonesia, South Asia	Gendered geographies of labour and displacement	Masculinity in informal sectors and shifting domestic roles	Informs spatial and emotional negotiations in informal housing and labour
	Still, C. (2017) <i>Dalit Women: Honour and Patriarchy in South India</i>	Intra-state migration, caste contexts	Patriarchy’s spatial and cultural expressions	Though centred on women, offers insight into caste-gender dynamics shaping male mobility	Deepens intersectional analysis in Indian internal migration

Table 1: Mapping Masculinity and Migration: Comparative Insights from International and Internal Scholarship

## **Reflexivity in the Field on Using Methodology as Memory**

It took me a while to realise that I was not simply collecting data, I was rehearsing memory.

As a material culture researcher working within the field of migration studies, I approached my doctoral fieldwork with a clear conceptual framework. I knew the value of oral histories, the ethics of positionality and the protocols of observation. But what no manual had prepared me for was the moment when the smell of damp cement in a bank worker's rented room would remind me of an army quarter, we [my family and I] had once lived in. Or how an Airforce Officer's confession about sleeping with one eye open in a new city would echo my own childhood insomnia after every relocation. In these moments, fieldwork stopped being fieldwork. It became a mirror.

Autoethnography reminds us that 'research is not just a way of knowing the world, but also a way of being in it' (Ellis et al., 2011). This is true for researchers like me, whose personal histories are entangled with their research themes. My ongoing experience of internal migration, layered through childhood relocations and now intensified by international academic mobility, shaped not only what I observed but how I interpreted it. I carried a sensitivity for small things; the arrangement of toiletries on narrow bathroom ledges, the presence or absence of a curtain separating a kitchen from a dining area, the chipped Godrej almirahs that followed men across states.<sup>vii</sup> These were not just observed fieldnotes, they were codes of settlement and impermanence. They were mnemonic cues, what anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989) might call 'habitual memory.' I noticed them not because I was trained to, but because I had lived them.

In many ways, my methodology began to resemble my own migrations: partial, adaptive, intuitive. Feminist scholars have long argued for the legitimacy of embodied knowledge in research (Haraway, 1988; Skeggs, 1997). Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge' insists that objectivity is not a detached view from nowhere, but rather a recognition of one's place within the matrix of observation. My place was never neutral, it was shaped by years of shifting schools, dialects and routines. I was, to borrow Sara Ahmed's (1999) phrasing, a 'stranger within,' always proximate, never quite settled.

This reflexive position did not simplify my fieldwork. If anything, it complicated it. I had to learn how to make space for both proximity and distance. For instance, when a young male migrant in Delhi described how he tried to recreate 'a sense of his village' by placing a framed photo of his parents above his bed, an earthen pot on his bed side table and jars of spices in his kitchen cupboard. I recognised the gesture intimately. My own

parents had done something similar, placing a calendar of India Gate in every house we moved into, regardless of the city. Yet, I could not allow my own memory to overwrite his. I had to let his story breathe its own air. This balancing act, between resonance and restraint, is at the heart of reflexive ethnography. It expands on what England (1994) identifies as the paradox of researcher presence; 'being both insider and outsider simultaneously.' This duality can be destabilising, but it also opens up richer analytical pathways. When one is attuned to one's own affective responses, one becomes more receptive to the silences, pauses and deflections in others' narratives.

There were times when I instinctively wanted to comfort a participant, to say, 'I know what you mean'. But I did not. This was because I did not, not really. His journey was not mine. His train routes, payment slips, fractured friendships, these were his alone. What I shared was not the content of his experience, but the contour of dislocation. The familiarity of not belonging.

One particularly telling moment came during an interview in a narrow room off a busy industrial alleyway. A man from Himachal Pradesh described how he could no longer remember the layout of his home village. 'It's blurred now,' he said, 'like the ink on a cheap receipt.' That phrase sat with me for days. I realised I, too, have stopped remembering certain houses we lived in. I remember the names of cities, the school uniforms, the colours of the gates.

But the interiors (where we kept the glasses and what direction the bed faced) have vanished. My memory is partial and selective. So is my method. What emerges, then, is a methodological approach grounded in intimacy and instability. I do not pretend to offer a universal theory of migration. Rather, I offer a lens forged in motion, a way of seeing, shaped by having always arrived from elsewhere.

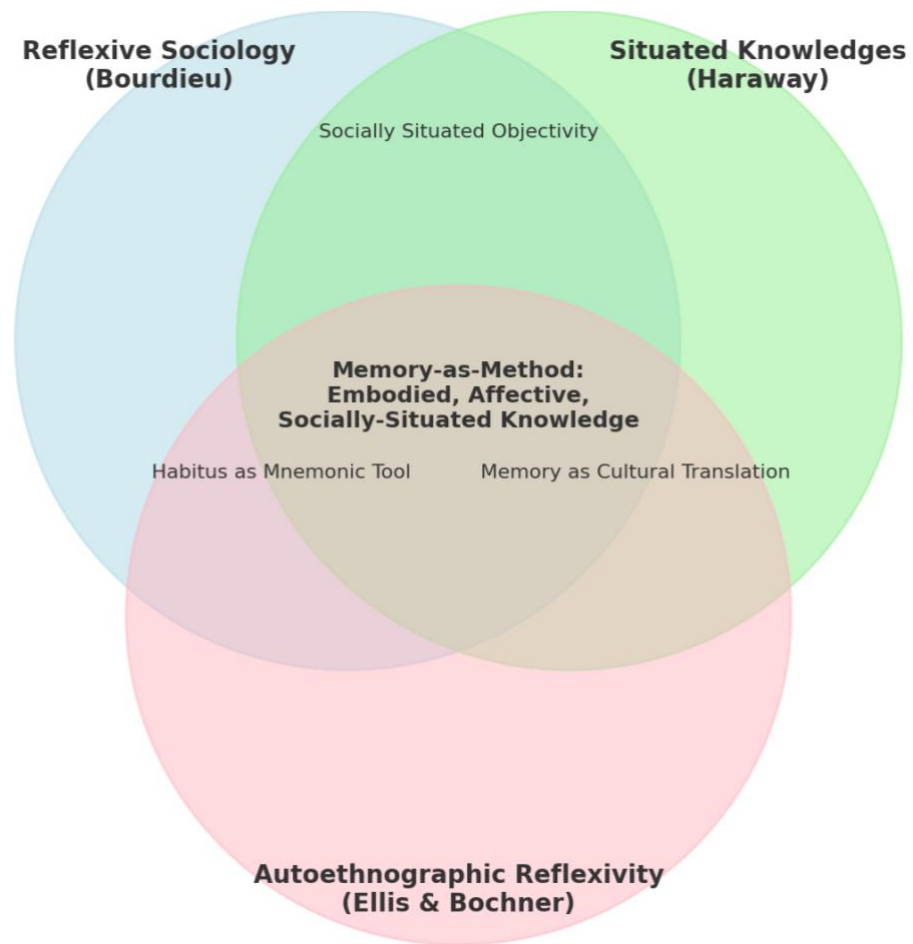
While I have woven these theoretical threads into my reflections, it became evident that the complexity of reflexivity in this study (particularly when it is rooted in embodied memory and situated cultural knowledge) benefits from a more schematic synthesis. The methodology as memory matrix (**Table 2**) integrates the theories that most directly shaped my approach, mapping their conceptual foundations onto the methodological stance of memory as method that underpins this work.

Situating these theories in the Indian context underscores how internal migration is not a homogenous phenomenon but a continual negotiation of difference (linguistic, culinary, sartorial and spatial). The reflexive sociological stance makes visible how the researcher's own habitus, formed through repeated exposure to such cultural multiplicity, becomes an epistemological resource. Haraway's (1988) insistence on partial

perspectives is salient in a country where even ‘internal’ borders often involve profound cultural translation. Autoethnographic reflexivity here is not simply about self-disclosure; it is about tracing the continuities between the affective geographies of my own movements and those of the men whose narratives populate this study. In recognising these convergences, the act of research itself becomes a re-inhabitation of mobile life, blurring the line between memory-work and fieldwork. Following the integration of these theoretical perspectives in the matrix below, the conceptual model (**Figure 1**) visualises their intersection as a dynamic and iterative process.

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Key Proponent(s)</b>	<b>Core Concept</b>	<b>Connection to ‘Methodology as Memory’</b>	<b>Reflections from Narrative</b>
Reflexive Sociology	Pierre Bourdieu	Researchers must interrogate their own habitus, positionality and the structural contexts that shape knowledge production.	Memory is socially situated; the researcher’s trajectory shapes perception and interpretation.	My repeated relocations within India’s culturally diverse regions (across languages, foods and domestic routines) structure what I notice (from the texture of cement walls to the arrangement of kitchen utensils) embedding habitus in observation.
Situated Knowledges	Donna Haraway	All knowledge is partial, embodied and accountable to location; objectivity is positional transparency.	Fieldwork is shaped by lived histories of moving between regions with different dialects, cuisines and gender norms.	My recall of bathroom ledges, school transfers and railway station snack stalls is not neutral data, but the embodied imprint of my social and cultural mobility.
Autoethnographic Reflexivity	Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner	Researcher’s own life is a source of data; affect and personal memory guide interpretation.	Method and memory are intertwined; the sensory recall of space and objects is both personal and analytical.	Fieldwork became an act of re-inhabiting my own migrations; memories of government transfer orders and improvised domestic setups mirrored participants’ experiences.

*Table 2: Integrating Reflexive, Situated and Autoethnographic Frameworks in Researching Internal Migration*



*Figure 1: Conceptual Model: Memory-as-Method in Internal Migration Research*

Rather than positioning reflexive sociology (**Bourdieu, 1984**), situated knowledge (**Haraway, 1988**) and autoethnographic reflexivity (**Ellis and Bochner, 2011**) as a discrete or sequential stage, the model renders them as overlapping and mutually constitutive domains, each informing and reshaping the others through the embodied act of remembering. This interrelation is culturally embedded: for migrant Indian men, the smell of damp cement, terrazzo tiled floors<sup>viii</sup> or the practice of unpacking a brass lota<sup>ix</sup> are not simply mnemonic triggers, but situated epistemologies rooted in postcolonial geographies and classed histories of movement.

In the model, the central zone (labelled Memory-as-Method) marks the site where theory and lived experience are inseparable. Here, my positionality, sensory recall and cultural familiarity function as active instruments of knowledge production. This is important in the Indian internal migration context, where state transfers, occupational dislocation and linguistic border-crossings produce what might be termed 'soft borders' (fluid but socially significant boundaries that shape identity and belonging). The model thus makes explicit that reflexivity in such research

is a cultural necessity and to work within these mobilities requires inhabiting the third space between observation and participation, and between documentation and re-creation.

### **Researching While Migrating Again**

The irony of researching migration while migrating again is not lost on me.

When I began my PhD in the United Kingdom, I did not anticipate the dissonance that would emerge between my scholarly inquiry and my daily lived experience. I had once been the child of internal migrants within India, now I was a transnational academic migrant, negotiating new bureaucracies, currencies and silences. My visa status, housing contracts and NHS registrations became as much a part of my intellectual formation as Postgraduate conferences or literature reviews.

Diaspora, as Hall (1990) reminds us, is about the continual negotiation of identity across spaces that are never wholly yours. This Doctoral research became a second diaspora. Not in the literal sense of exile, but as a state of epistemic and emotional dislocation. I was researching the lives of migrant men from a distance (temporal, spatial and affective) and yet, I was also living a version of that narrative myself (marked by separation, shaped by memory, haunted by simultaneity).

In this dual role, my work mirrored the layered typologies of migration outlined in the masculinity and migration matrix (**Table 1**), a convergence of internal displacement, as experienced in my early life within India and transnational academic migration in the present. This positioning sharpened my awareness of how internal migration in India, while lacking the passport-stamped drama of international borders, can demand equivalent forms of cultural, linguistic and gendered renegotiation.

My own shifting between contexts became a methodological resource; a way to see how domestic objects, everyday routines and even modes of leisure function differently under conditions of temporary settlement and administrative precarity. In critically reading my own mobility alongside that of my participants, I could better situate these movements within broader debates on postcolonial mobility regimes (**Silvey, 2004; Brettell, 2014**) and the embodied labour of crossing 'soft borders' within the nation-state.

I conducted data collection in India and its analysis in England. I translated speech across continents, crossing not only languages but affective terrains. In many ways, I was both researcher and migrant, navigating institutional alienation and cultural recalibration. What Clifford (1994) refers to as the 'dwelling-in-travel' became my daily condition. There is a subtle violence to intellectual migration. The sense that you are always

slightly mispronouncing yourself. That your methods must always be explained twice. That your research must justify itself in global terms, even when it emerges from deeply local soil. Spivak's (1988) call to interrogate who can speak and who gets heard, echoes in how I presented my work; always positioned and always negotiated, and yet, it is precisely this unsettledness that gives my research its depth. The diaspora of doing a PhD, of being split across geographies and epistemologies, enabled a layered seeing. I do not claim objectivity, I claim presence.

I write this from a small room that smells nothing like my childhood dwellings. But when I close my eyes, I can still hear the train announcements in Hindi. Still feel the impermanence beneath my feet. Still understand that to study migration is to live its aftermath, again and again.

### **Conclusion**

To research migration is to live with a certain kind of ache. Not always sharp, not always named, but persistent. It settles into the body like dust in a suitcase you never fully unpack. This PhD, for me, has not been a linear journey of knowledge acquisition, it has been a circling, a returning, a lingering in the in-between. In following the lives of occupationally mobile men, I set out to examine how masculinities are performed and remade within transitory domestic spaces. The reflexive frameworks mapped in the methodology as memory matrix were the methodological tools, making visible how my own embodied history of repeated relocations and shifting home-making rituals intersected with the stories I documented. In each narrative, there was a choreography of adjustment; beds placed in corners to create an illusion of privacy, utensils arranged to reconstitute a taste of origin, photographs tucked into wallets for decades. These were not marginal details but the grammar of survival.

The theories in the masculinity and migration matrix, situated this study within migration-masculinity scholarship, making clear the distinctiveness of India's internal migration regimes. These movements were not border crossings in the international sense, yet they carried all the textures of cultural negotiation; linguistic recalibration, administrative reclassification, shifts in gendered labour. They operated within what I call 'soft borders,' mutable zones where the official line between origin and destination blurs, but where everyday practices continue to reproduce difference. In such spaces, leisure emerged more than the discretionary 'free time.' It was the small acts of self-making embedded in the rhythms of work like, brewing tea in a familiar vessel, re-tying the same laces on boots carried for twenty years, reciting mantras to quiet the uncertainty of place.

This research underscores that internal migration cannot be fully understood without attending to its affective and material dimensions,

without recognising that home-making, object improvisation and embodied memory are as politically charged as wage remittances or census statistics. By holding theory and narrative together (by making the implicit frameworks visible through the matrices and conceptual model), the study offers a lens that does not separate knowledge from the body that produces it.

Bhabha's (1994) 'unhomely' is not a metaphor here but a lived condition, one that I now understand as generative rather than disruptive. The act of returning, of revisiting objects, smells and silences across time and space, is itself a form of scholarship. What I carry forward from this work is not a fixed conclusion, but a mobile lens; one that sees the entanglement of rupture and continuity, theory and biography, data and memory. To inhabit this mobility is not to abandon rigour, but to practise a form of knowing that moves, lingers and returns.

I came to study migration. I leave having remembered it.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Pheran is a traditional Kashmiri garment, a loose-fitting gown worn by both men and women in the region.

<sup>ii</sup> In the context of India, "traditional workers" primarily refers to individuals engaged in occupations passed down through generations, often linked to caste and social structures. Examples of traditional occupations in India might include potters, weavers, barbers, priests and various forms of agricultural labour, where these roles are often linked to specific castes and family lineages.

<sup>iii</sup> Kumaoni is a language of the Kumaon region in Uttarakhand, India.

<sup>iv</sup> Hindi is a major Indo-Aryan language, primarily spoken in India. It is one of the official languages of India and is also widely understood and spoken by the Indian diaspora.

<sup>v</sup> Bengali, also known as Bangla, is an Indo-Aryan language spoken by an estimated 250 million people, primarily in the Bengal region of South Asia.

<sup>vi</sup> Dhabas are roadside restaurants in the Indian subcontinent. They are on highways, generally serve local cuisine and also serve as truck stops.

<sup>vii</sup> A steel cupboard or wardrobe manufactured by the Godrej company. The term "almirah" is an Anglo-Indian word derived from Portuguese, meaning a wardrobe or cupboard. Godrej & Boyce introduced the steel almirah to India in 1923 and it quickly became a staple in Indian homes.

<sup>viii</sup> Terrazzo floor tiles are a composite material that is made by combining a cement base with an array of ground materials such as granite, quartz and marble.

<sup>ix</sup> A traditional Indian vessel, typically made of brass, used for various purposes, including religious rituals and as a decorative item.