

Migration and Racial Discrimination Against Northeast Indians: How the Racial and Cultural Stigmatisation is Perpetuating it in the Capital City of Delhi, India

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Abstract: Discrimination against the northeast Indians in the capital city of Delhi is a frequent phenomenon in India. Every year, various incidents of such cases substantiate this discriminatory situation. Although the kind of discrimination in Delhi against northeast India is considered under the umbrella of cultural and racial discrimination, stigmatization plays a critical role in the continuation of such discrimination. In fact, most of the discrimination against the northeast Indians is initiated by the negative stigmatization of the people from this region. Against this backdrop, comprehending the issue in the larger theoretical context of stigma popularised by sociologist Ervin Goffman is important to unfold the perpetuating discrimination the northeast Indians face in the capital city of India. This research paper argues that the discrimination against northeast Indians in Delhi has been perpetuated because of the frequent racial and cultural stigmatization of northeast Indians. Twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents from northeast India who reside in Delhi.

Keywords: Racism, northeast Indian, migration, culture, Delhi.

INTRODUCTION

A report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in 2014 mentioned that 54 percent of northeast Indians residing in Delhi face discrimination, and 74 percent feel unsafe in terms of ethnic insensitivity (PTI, 2014). A study conducted by the Centre for North East India Studies and Policy Research by Jamia Millia in collaboration with the National Women Commission reported that 67 percent of northeast India women face discrimination in their daily lives, 23 percent face harassment from their landlord, and 42 percent verbal abuse and 26 percent face molestation in four metros Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bangalore, where Delhi suppresses other having overall 81 percent discrimination against northeast Indian women (Gohain, 2014). Despite continuing discrimination, the outmigration of the northeast Indians to metros is perpetuating, and Delhi is one of the primary destinations. The 2011 census mentioned that there are around 9,44,050 inter-state migrants in Northeast India. A lack of infrastructure, education, political unrest, geographical constraints, and employment opportunities compelled many of its population to migrate to cities like Delhi, Mumbai,

Kolkata, and Bangalore, where they frequently face racism, sexism, harassment, and violence. Food habits, dressing, and physical appearance often pose significant barriers to Northeastern people's acceptance in other parts of the country. Their uniqueness and distinct identity are frequently associated and labeled with discriminatory terms like *chinky*, *chinese*, and *momos*. Additionally, the coronavirus outbreak has stigmatized Northeastern by associating them with coronavirus (Haokip, 2019). There is a consistent struggle for the northeastern people to gain recognition and acceptance as equal citizens of India, discarding their distinct identity. Despite various efforts and special provisions for inclusion, migrants from northeast India continue to face multiple discriminatory challenges in mainstream India. Although a few existing studies have tried to address this discriminatory reality, considering the increasing incidents of such discrimination has justified the rationale behind the objective of this paper. The paper analyses the discriminatory situation against northeast Indians from the perspective of stigmatization, which was not widely discussed in the existing literature. This article argues that discrimination against the northeast Indians is

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continuing primarily due to the constant racial and cultural stigmatization of northeast Indians. Highlighting the argument, this article emphasizes the role of stigma in understanding the discrimination against Northeast Indians, primarily in the capital city of Delhi, India.

Discrimination against the northeast Indians in mainland India is a frequent occurrence. Distinct racial looks and different cultural standards often serve as a barrier for northeast Indians concerning their acceptance in mainland India. Bhaumik (2013) mentions that integrating the northeast with India is a geographical incident rather than any culturally shared bond. Here, he emphasized the historical and cultural distinctiveness of the region from the rest of India. Wouters & Subba (2013) mentions that the mongoloid features of most of the northeast Indians failed to get recognition in the image of the Indian faces. The racial distinctiveness of the northeastern is peculiar to the common imagination of an Indian face. Rai (2015) mentions that racism in India is a postcolonial construct that resulted from the othering of northeastern people from the Hinduised and Aryanised Indian category. Bora (2019) says that although racism against the northeast Indians is generally understood in the line of culture, it goes beyond and encompasses a nuanced perspective of colonialism, nationalism, and counterinsurgency. This means that the whole idea of otherness concerning northeast Indians is created through the politico-historical condition within the country. Whatever the reason, othering northeast Indians is an established reality based on ample existing literature. Northeast Indians often suffer from various discriminatory nomenclature like- *chinky*, *chapta*, and *momo* in the rest of India (Baruah, 2005). Negative stigmatization of northeast Indians, like coronavirus, is common (Haokip, 2019). As the outmigration of the northeast Indians is increasing, the kind of discrimination against them also frequently occurs. Various factors contribute to the outmigration of the northeast Indians to the rest of India despite the existing discrimination against them. The pull factors are education, health, job opportunities, and better living standards. In contrast, the push factors are an underdeveloped economy, a high rate of unemployed youth, natural calamities, social and political unrest, and numerous insurgency groups in the region, which often push and compel them to migrate (Mazumder & Dasgupta, 2015). Besides the change in tribal societies, reducing the importance of traditional tribal institutions and an emerging generation gap in economic activities also compel many northeastern youths to migrate outside of the northeast region (Nongkynrih, 2009). If

we introspect the phenomenon of othering northeast Indians, then the whole idea of racism revolves around the concept of labeling 'self' and 'other,' which has become a very prominent scale for division (Sitlhou & Punathil, 2017). In the case of northeast Indians, this othering and discrimination are created through the process of stigmatization, which can be comprehended in the theoretical understanding of stigma by Goffman.

Ervin Goffman's theory of stigmatization, crafted in his book "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963)," is an approach that tries to elucidate the trajectory of stigma as a universal phenomenon. He believes everyone has faced the stigma of one kind or another. He defines stigma as a general social process, an "attribute that is deeply discrediting," which means discrediting another person's physical appearance and identity and is negatively perceived. His understanding of stigma can be attributed to many contemporary issues related to race, gender, and ethnicity. He also made a vivid distinction between 'virtual social identity' (what a person should be per societal standards) and actual social identity (the person's real self). Moreover, when there is a discrepancy between them, individuals are stigmatized. He opined that stigma is embedded in the language of relationships. Stigma is a mark of differentiating based on socially conferred judgment (Pescosolido *et al.*, 2008). In this context, similarly, mainstream India has set the bar of the identity of being Indian, linking it with a particular race, physical appearance, and culture. Northeast Indians, being different and diverse in terms of their culture and practices, fail to fit into those criteria of being Indian. As a result, they tend to become victims of stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion from the mainstream. Such experiences of stigma have led to insecurity and inferiority among people. This paper analyses two critical dimensions of discrimination against northeast Indians in Delhi: Discrimination against the northeast Indians and associated stigma with such kinds of discrimination.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Sample

To understand the numerous discriminatory challenges of the northeastern migrants in Delhi, India, data were collected from 20 northeast Indians residing in Delhi. The data for this research was gathered between November 2018 and March 2019. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the 20 respondents; however, to maintain respondent confidentiality, we have replaced the respondents' names with letters from A-T.

Table 1: Respondent's Profile

Respondents	Gender	Home State	Purpose of Migration	Respondents	Gender	Home State	Purpose of Migration
A	male	Nagaland	Education	J	female	Tripura	University student
B	male	Assam	Private sector job	K	male	Manipur	UPSC coaching
C	female	Arunachal Pradesh	Education	L	female	Nagaland	Job in a private sector
D	female	Manipur	Fashion Designing	M	male	Mizoram	Education
E	female	Assam	Job in bank	N	male	Tripura	Job in a private sector
F	male	Assam	Job in hotel	O	female	Meghalaya	Hairdresser
G	female	Manipur	Private sector job	P	female	Mizoram	Education
H	male	Arunachal Pradesh	UPSC coaching	Q	female	Meghalaya	Nursing
I	female	Nagaland	Beautician	R	male	Sikkim	Job in a travel agency

Tools Used for Data Collection

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule. During the interview, most of the questions were open-ended, while questions concerning the demographic profile of the respondents were close-ended. Interviews were recorded with the help of an audio recorder (MSTECH Digital Voice Mp3).

Procedure

The data collected for this research is qualitative, and the analysis of it is organized in the following steps. The data analysis for this research is as follows. First, the findings and observations were transcribed into MS Word. Secondly, following the open coding strategy, relevant codes were developed from the data. Thirdly, the developed open codes were merged into various themes or patterns. Emphasis was placed on ensuring that data were not misinterpreted and over interpreted.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study has found various forms of stigmatization and discrimination against the northeast Indians living in Delhi. This paper has tried to club these experiences into three broad themes: food, fashion and gender, and the China factor. Each theme has tried to comprehend the various kinds of discrimination northeast Indian migrants have to endure and constantly fight for their identity.

The respondents in this research reveal food-based discrimination against them. The food culture of northeast India has always been stereotyped as filthy, unhygienic, smelly, and dog-eaters. Through interviews with the respondent, it was revealed that denial of room to northeast Indians is common because of their food practice. Respondents are denied room and face

humiliation because they eat beef and pork. Many Hindu rent owners believe beef eaters will pollute their houses. There are similar cases in which food has been used as an indicator to stigmatize the northeast Indians. For instance, one of our respondents reveals, *"In Vijaya Nagar Delhi once, as I was cooking fermented beans for my dinner, my rent owner immediately asked me to vacate the room. He said he could not bear the smell of my food, and he refused to pay my security money back as he believed I had polluted his house"* Encountering stigmatization and discrimination because of dressing sense, fashion, hairstyle, and hair coloring is another dimension mentioned by respondents. The discrimination based on clothing is part of everyday stigmatization and discrimination for the people from northeast Indians. Such kind of stigmatization and discrimination is more common towards women. As one of the respondents mentions, *'In Delhi, they treat us as though we are cheap women. Once, I was traveling in the metro wearing a short dress, and many of the aunties gazed at me and began murmuring, "iski kapada toh dekho, itna dikha rahi hai" (look at her clothes it is so revealing).'* Sexualized verbal harassment towards northeast Indian girls is a common phenomenon. Various negative stigmas are frequently associated with northeast Indian girls. The friendly nature of northeastern women is often stereotyped as easy-going and loose characters. Besides, they are often stigmatized as gold diggers who exploit boys in false love and marital promises. Another aspect of stigmatization can be comprehended as the China factor. For a long time, India has had antagonistic relations with China primarily because of China's aggressive attitude towards India. This hostile relationship is often reflected in the way many treat northeast Indians. The majority of northeast Indians have a physical resemblance to Chinese people because of their mongoloid features. Such a physical similarity

has resulted in constant stigmatism and discrimination of northeast people. The racial stigmatization based on physical appearance has resulted in many of them initiating feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. One of the respondents narrated his personal experience. "During the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a few of our friends were discussing the origin of the coronavirus and India's probability of getting affected. One of our friends (outside from the northeast) said that if coronavirus comes to India, it will come through northeast India. He said that northeast Indian people eat everything like Chinese people do. So, the Coronavirus will spread through them."

Revisiting the discrimination mentioned above, it is obvious that stigma plays a crucial role in its perpetuation. Negative labelling of northeast Indians has been a part of their identity in Delhi. This constant stigmatization has become their operational identity, discarding their original identity based on actuality and meritocracy. From Goffman's understanding of stigma, this situation can be considered a spoiled identity. Constant negative labelling of the northeast Indians outside their region has created a separate identity that discredits their original one. A northeast Indian is evaluated as a person with weird food habits, a dog eater, a cheap, promiscuous woman, and something associated with China. Such force identity often creates a gap between one's own identity and externally accepted identity, and according to Goffman, it is a situation of stigmatization. This kind of situation often discredits the actual attributes of the northeast Indians and compels them to carry a spoiled identity.

CONCLUSION

The discrimination against the northeast Indians is continuing despite many efforts that have been made to curb it. Constant racial and cultural stigmatization is one of the primary reasons for the perpetuating insensitivity towards northeast Indians. This research paper shows that some of the major patterns of discrimination against northeast Indians, like food, racial features, dress, and attire, are initiated and continued through the process of stigmatization. Perhaps this article's findings can be helpful in giving a new vantage in understanding the existing discrimination against the northeast Indians. Although discrimination against northeast Indians in mainland India is an ongoing academic discourse, very few pieces of literature have conceptualized the role of stigma in perpetuating such discrimination. This research can be useful in unfolding it. Emphasizes the role of stigma in understanding the discrimination against Northeast Indians, primarily in the capital city of Delhi, India. Nevertheless, the limitation of this research is centred around its limited number of respondents. For this research, only 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. Future endeavors can be made to comprehensively understand the situation with a larger sample size and with the addition of other metros like Bangalore,

Mumbai, and Kolkata. Discrimination against northeast Indians is a crucial issue, and it demands a suitable solution, especially at this juncture where the outmigration of the northeastern youths is increasing to mainland India

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest to declare

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