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**Research in progress: Racial Discrimination and Violence against  
Northeasterners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014**

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## Racial Discrimination and Violence against Northerners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014

--- Hoineilhing Sithou and Salah Punathil

### Introduction

This working paper primarily deals with two issues. First, it gives a brief account about racial discrimination and violence that Northerners experience in the metropolitan city of Delhi in the recent past. Secondly it deals with the state response to the problem of discrimination and violence in the form of the Bezbaruah Committee, 2014 and the receptions and perceptions among migrants in Delhi about its implementation. The data presented in this paper is part of a survey that was conducted with ninety five respondents to understand the problems of the Northeast populace outside Northeast region, taking the case of New Delhi and using the snowball sampling method. The survey is prepared with elaborate questions seeking respondents' view on all contours of discrimination and violence that persists against Northerners in Delhi. While doing the snowball sampling we have ensured that the sample should represent these internal categories of subjects under study; members from all states in Northeast, male, female, students, informal labourers, professionals and government employees. We have given attention to the residential settlements of Northerners to understand the spatial differences in experiencing discrimination. The survey was part of a project entitled 'Archiving Marginalities in Northeast India' spearheaded by the Department of Sociology and Centre for Regional Studies under the UGC-UPE Phase II, University of Hyderabad.

The Northeast of India comprises of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is the home of numerous ethnic communities that have migrated from all points of the compass, majority of them belonging to the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid racial grouping (Downs, 2011, P. 223). 'A large segment of the population is made up of the mongoloids of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family who came into the region from northwestern China, northern Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos at different points of time, and the Caucasoids belonging to the Aryan linguistic family (Nongbri, 2014, p. 4)'. In fact, many of them trace their lineage to Southeast Asia with a few centuries of acculturation in between (Mc Duie-Ra,

2012, p. 27), but its strategic location is at the confluence of South, South East and East Asia (Nongbri, 2014, p. 5). In accordance with general contemporary usage, Northeast India designates that portion of the country which lies to the north and east of Bangladesh, between approximately Latitude 20° to 29° north and Longitude 90° to 98° east (Pachua, 1998, p. 1). It spans over an area of about 2.6 lakh sq. km and covering nearly 8 percent of the land area of India and less than 4 percent (3.8 percent) of its population (39 million according to 2001 census) (Nongbri, 2014, p. 3).

The large scale migration from Northeast India towards metropolitan cities like Delhi in the last two decades makes Northeasterners a visible category in the so called mainland of India. Duncan Mc Duie-Ra (2012) argues that the migration of Northeasterners to places like Delhi has blurred the boundary prevailed between Indian nation state and its perceived essential other, the Northeast. Poor infrastructure, unemployment and political turmoil in Northeastern states push the people to move out of their states. The employment opportunities opened in the neo-liberal regime attracted them to the cities like Delhi. While many of the youth are employed in informal sector, many migrate for educational purpose and employment in the government services and private companies.

Over a period of time, the Northeasterners came to exist outside the conscious mind space of the average Indian, and they are greeted with various derogatory categories because of their physical and cultural characteristics. As a mode of discourse, the stereotype functions to exaggerate the difference of the 'Other', and as a mode of identification, it operates a series of mutually exclusive categories differentiating 'Self' and 'Other'. These occurrences are not just contemporary social phenomena but something that has historical relevance. During the colonial regime, the colonial discourse wanted to construe the native as a population of decadent nature and hold certain stereotype on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. Therefore, race was a means of differentiation done for the convenience of classification. To a sociologist, race is not determined by physical characteristics alone. Rather, race is a social concept that may vary from one society to another depending upon how individual members of a society perceived physical differences among human beings. The idea of race itself and the actual divisions of persons into groups based on selected hereditary features like skin colour, facial features and hair textures are social constructs (Banton, 1987).

This has to be noted that earlier discourse on racism in India was mainly framed around caste based discrimination. However, such a discourse was very marginal and racial violence is never understood as an Indian experience in academic and political discourse in India. Race is always perceived as an alien thing. However, the experience of Northeastern migrants in Delhi and other cities in India invokes the problem of racial violence in India today more seriously than ever. The recent campaign for anti-racism legislation in India throws in an array of sociological questions and debates on prejudice, discrimination, identity and racism. The practice of racism on the Northeast people in mainland India is of a different order in which their identity as an Indian is questioned. To add to the long list of death, cases of physical atrocities and physical assault against Northeasterners, a 29 years old Manipuri BPO employee was beaten to death by five youth in South Delhi on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2014. Six months prior to this incident, a 19 years old Arunachal Pradesh student Nido Tania died after being beaten with iron rods and sticks by some men. This happened after an altercation with a shop keeper who allegedly made fun of his clothes and hair<sup>1</sup>. A committee called the Bezbaruah Committee was set up following the attack and murder of Nido Tania in 2014.

### **Violence against Northeasterners in Delhi**

The narratives of Northeastern migrants in Delhi expose different forms of racial violence in various arenas of life in Delhi. To understand the problem of racial violence against Northeastern migrants and its multiple manifestations, it is important to explain how Northeasterners are constituted as different and the essential other of the mainland India. The increasing migrations of people from various parts of Northeastern state to Delhi in the recent past, due to the backwardness in their respective homelands and better opportunities for education and employment in Delhi, has brought the question of intolerance and violence rather than diversity and accommodation in the city. The geographical belongingness of being placed at the outer edge of India's territorial map, but more importantly, physical appearance and cultural differences, marks the Northeasterners in Delhi as a visibly different social category. However, the problem lies in the fact that this difference is hierarchised racially and often met with violence. The experience of discrimination and violence comes from non-Northeasterner, ranging from verbal abuse to physical attacks such as killings and frequent instances raping of Northeastern girls. Nandita Haksar's recent book, *The Exodus is Not Over: Migrations from the Ruptured Homelands of Northeast India* (2016), features first generation youngsters from the Northeast who migrate to

Delhi, Bengaluru, Goa and other places in search of work. Mostly, they find jobs as low-rung workers in retail, the hospitality industry or call centres. She relates the stories of Tangkhul Naga migrant workers from Ukhrul district of Manipur. She writes that it has taken enormous courage for Ngalatim Hongray, her brother, Yaokhalek Hongray, and Livingstone Shazia as well as RS Mayori to tell their stories: the humiliation and racism that they endure and the utter lack of worker rights<sup>2</sup>.

The following sections show how violence emerges as the most disturbing concern in the narratives of migrants while we conducted field work in Delhi. Most of the respondents, irrespective of their profile, have at least one experience of violence to narrate either as their own experience or as something that their friends, relatives or known people have gone through. Symbolic violence through verbal abuse is something that many respondents have experienced at least once in their life in Delhi. Derogatory words such as ‘Momos’ and ‘Chinkys’ are very frequent and directly deployed on them in public places. These are racially stigmatised ways of addressing a population having distinctive physical features and cultural practices. Apart from these, they are also called *Nepalis*, *Bahadurs*, *Firangis*, *Japanese* and *Chinese* all of which identify them as foreigner. Such identifications as foreigner despite their actual belongingness to the Indian nation generate an identity crisis in their everyday life. The narratives from the field reveals many other everyday forms of discrimination and violence they encounter in Delhi. Most of the respondents say that they are forced to pay more charge to auto-rickshaws and it often results in verbal abuse and quarrel. Many respondents agreed that they are subjected to discrimination and humiliation when it comes to their accommodation in Delhi. They are denied houses by house owners as they are deemed unfit to the prescribed life style and food practices. Their food practices especially meat cooking such as pork and beef often leads to conflict and end up with humiliation from house owner and neighbours. The culture of socialisation among Northeasterners especially celebrations where boys and girls mingle are easily sexualised by others. There are several instances to show how such notions lead to abuse, quarrel and violence where neighbours and house owners eventually blame the Northeasterners as deviants. The instances of denying house for Northeastern migrants and forcefully getting evicted from houses are also not very rare.

However, the direct physical attacks are most overt expression of racial discrimination in Delhi. There is strong sense of fear among Northeastern

migrants that they may get targeted by others in Delhi. The recent instances of violent attacks intensified their sense of insecurity. Women are the most vulnerable among these migrants as they are more subjected to both physical and symbolic violence. The instances of rape in Delhi make the Northeastern women very uncomfortable especially travelling in the night. Many women migrants have said that they are verbally harassed by men due to their stereotypical perception about their sexuality. The dress pattern, appearance and visibility in the public life are not always perceived in a normalised sense as their body is sexually objectified in the public life.

Most of the respondents, both men and women say that they are careful in avoiding confrontations with people and more submissive to avoid potential violence. They are less assertive and often ignore small abuses to avoid violent attacks from others. Some of the narratives reveal how they are subjected to abuse and even physical threats when they resist everyday forms of violence. Most of the respondents think that their home place is safer than Delhi despite of all turbulence there. However, many female respondents have agreed that coming out at night time is risky for women in both the places. Some respondents especially that from Manipur think Delhi is safer than their home place. The ethnic conflicts and army violence and poor governance make life in states like Manipur extremely difficult and insecure. For migrants from states like Manipur, Delhi is not merely a place for better educational and employment opportunities, but a place where life is comparatively safer. This indicates that that the experience of Delhi varies significantly among Northeastern migrants depending on their home land in Northeast. For example, many migrants from Assam state says that they experience less problem in Delhi as they are geographically and culturally more in proximity with the mainland and many of them physically look similar with the mainland people. Most of the Nagas think that their homeland is safer and comfortable than Delhi but lacks the opportunities available in Delhi.

#### **The Bezbaruah Committee, 2014**

The Ministry of Home Affairs had constituted a Committee under the chairmanship of Shri M.P. Bezbaruah, retired IAS and member of the Northeastern Council, to look into the various concerns of the citizens hailing from the Northeastern States who are living in different parts of the country and to suggest suitable remedial measure, including legal measure which could be taken up by the Government<sup>3</sup>. The eleven-member committee headed by a retired IAS

officer M.P. Bezbaruah submitted its report on the discrimination against racial attacks on members the Northeast community in metros of India.

The 82-page report paints a grim picture of the nature and extent of discrimination and attacks against the Northeast community. It provides a comprehensive list of short-term and long-term measures that must be taken by the government for counter discrimination against the community. The report estimates that over two lakh people from the Northeast have migrated to Delhi between 2005 and 2013 and that about 86 percent of them have faced discrimination. It also finds that Delhi is the worst offender among the metro cities when it comes to racial discrimination against people from the Northeast<sup>4</sup>.

The Government responded favourably towards the following points under the Bezbaruah committee recommendations:

- a) The insertion of new sections of 153C and 509A in the Indian Penal Code to strengthen the legal framework against racial discrimination.
- b) Setting up of a special helpline no. 1093 for Northeast people.
- c) Setting up a panel of seven lawyers, out of which five are women lawyers, to provide legal assistance to people from Northeast.
- d) In order to educate the people about the Northeast, Universities have been advised that history of Northeast and participation in the freedom movement of the country should be taught at graduation level and post-graduation level, and for this purpose, curriculum be changed.
- e) Appointment of a nodal police officer and a police station for Northeasterners for immediate registering of FIR.
- f) A relief fund for helping victims of hate crimes is given under Delhi Victim compensation scheme 2011.

### **Was the implementation of the recommendations affective at the ground level?**

In the survey we conducted, there were two questions that were asked specifically on the Bezbaruah committee:

- (1) The Bezbaruah Committee which was set up in 2014 had recommended the act of reaching out to Northeast people via social media: facebook (eg. Northeast India against Racism), whatsapp groups, special helpline for Northeast people (No. 1093) which is synchronised with Helpline No. 100, email support etc. Have

you found them useful? Do you think they have to an extent solved the problem faced by the Northeast migrants? Comment.

(2) Of the response that was made by the Government towards the Bezbaruah committee recommendations, which of the following is most relevant, most active and effective as a long-term solution to the problem faced by Northeasterners in Delhi? Please mark it on priority base. Please narrate.

**TABLE 1**

Has the implementation of the recommendations made by Bezbaruah Committee succeeded in solving the problem faced by the Northeasterners?	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	65	68.4
No	12	12.6
Not Aware	14	14.7
No Answer	4	4.2
TOTAL	95	100

A clear-cut majority of 68.4 percent of the respondents gave credit to the efforts made by the government through the implementation of the recommendations made by the committee in solving many issues faced by the Northeasterners in the context of Delhi. Even those of them who had not really made use of them felt that the presence of such efforts, like the helpline number 1093 which can be easily dialled in case of emergency, gave a sense of security and comfort. Though a few were sceptical about it, there were those who were not aware of it but believed it would be useful if utilised effectively. The need to promote awareness about the laws was brought up by a post-graduate from Shillong working with Convergys. He suggested that the various Northeast Student Associations in Delhi should work together with the Delhi Police in spreading awareness about the number 1093 and other means of availing police assistance.

There were many incidents narrated by the respondents in which they had first-hand experience of using the various laws implemented under the Bezbaruah Committee recommendations. A 45 years old government employee from Manipur who had been staying in Delhi for twenty four years responded in the affirmative. He said, the very fact that the committee had come into existence

proved that authorities have taken cognizance. The fear of the law inculcated in the minds of the people prevents the vulnerable to a great extent. It also helped the people to approach the concern authorities in a convenient way than before. The setting up of a helpline number 1093 will be the fastest medium to reach to the authorities. The salary of a Call Centre employee from Manipur was withheld for a long time on the ground that his residential certificate was considered invalid. He approached the police who ignored him initially but responded when he warned them of contacting the Northeast Support Centre and Helpline. There were stories of respondents using the helpline due to harassment by landlord who refused to give back security deposit, molestations of friends and fights with local (non-Northeasterners) etc. Community bond is however strong and people from the region have a tendency to approach their friends, community people (student organisations/ church groupings) and relatives, and usually used the law as the last resort to solve their issues, as is the practice in Northeast India. This very often does not solve but aggravate the situation and there is a need to create awareness to make them trust the law of the Indian State along with efforts to build the trust.

**TABLE 2**

BEZBARUAH COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS	No. of RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE
a) The insertion of new sections of 153C and 509A in the Indian Penal Code to strengthen the legal framework against racial discrimination.	14	14.7
b) Setting up of a special helpline no. 1093 for Northeast people.	21	22
c) Setting up a panel of 7 lawyers out of which 5 are women lawyers to provide legal assistance to people from Northeast.	5	5.2
d) In order to educate the people about the Northeast, Universities have been advised that history of Northeast and participation in the freedom movement of the country should be taught at graduation level and post-graduation	32	33.7

level, and for this purpose, curriculum be changed.		
e) Appointment of a nodal police officer and a police station for Northeasterners for immediate registering of FIR.	4	4.2
f) A relief fund for helping victims of hate crimes is given under Delhi Victim compensation scheme 2011.	0	0
No Answer	19	20
TOTAL	95	100

The Table 2 above shows the respondents' choice as to the most relevant and effective recommendations of the committee in solving the problem faced by Northeasterners. We can see that 33.7 percent of the respondents supported the inclusion of Northeast India in the National level curriculum at the graduate and post-graduation level with the purpose of bridging the cognitive gap and map and enhancing knowledge of the diversity of the Indian society.

A 34 years old respondent from Manipur residing in Munirka (New Delhi) opined that money and relief fund is not really important. She also doubted the efficiency of the option of 'insertion of new sections of 153 C and 509 A in the Indian Penal Code' because the culprits always have a chance to bargain their way out from the rule of law as in the case of Jessica<sup>5</sup>. Another respondent from Manipur staying in the same locality in New Delhi highlighted how language barrier becomes an obstacle in dealing with policemen. He continued, '...the appointment of a nodal police officer and a special police station for Northeasterners will definitely make approaching the law easier. Educating the people about the rich and relevant history of Northeast States will make others realise that we are also Indian just like them. They always looked upon us as Chinese or Nepali due to our physical appearances... But we always perceived them as Indians. This is because we were much aware of them through the national news, movies, or learnings in textbooks since high-school'<sup>6</sup>. A 25 year old research student from Jawaharlal Nehru University was positive that education was the answer in solving the problems faced by people from the Northeast region in India. She said, 'Education is important as it is the first thing moulding the mind-set of children. Knowing the history of Northeast India, and to be more precise, Northeast is in India will really

help in building and connecting people from different regions in the knowledge that they are people of one nation<sup>7</sup>.

To conclude, the question of racial discrimination in India needs to be addressed more sharply both at the level of academic practice and policy implementations. The continuing problem of discrimination and violence in Delhi and other cities demands more empirical examination to come up with viable solutions and implementation of policies. This working paper would be further advanced from the above discussion by elaborating the following issues to arrive at more concrete views on the problem. First, we have realised from our survey that the internal difference within the category of Northeast in terms of state, class, gender, physical appearance and culture are very significant in mapping the divergent experience of discrimination and violence among the Northeasterners in Delhi. Secondly, racisms against Northeasterners need to be theorised adequately and discussed in our academic discourse more actively. To achieve this, a detailed discussion of literature on race and discrimination will be done while developing this paper. Thirdly, it is interesting to ask how the experience of migrants in Delhi differs from other metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad and semi-urban location like Kerala state. This would allow us to come up with a comparative understanding of racial attitude against Northeasterners in various regions of the country.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Bhowmick, Nilanjana. 2014 (Feb. 6). What the death of NidoTaniam tells us about racism in India. Viewed on 9th August, 2014. <http://time.com/4876/nido-taniam-india-racism/>

<sup>2</sup> As cited in Civil Society, <http://www.civilsocietyonline.com/books-authors/lost-migrants-from-the-northeast/> (accessed on 10th April, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Bezbaruah Committee, <http://iasscore.in/current-affairs-ias-main.php?id=87> (accessed date: 10th April, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Polanki, Pallavi, Sunday, March 19th, 2017, Bezbaruah Report on North East Community: Five Key Recommendations, Firstpost, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/bezbaruah-report-north-east-community-five-key-recommendations-1678393.html> (accessed on 19th March, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Lal was shot dead on 30th April 1999 by the son of a politician. But the accused was initially acquitted by the court.

<sup>6</sup> Seilienmang Haokip, Interviewed on 2th July.

<sup>7</sup> Indrani Nath, Interviewed on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2016.

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