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LOOKING FOR INDIANNESS: THE IDENTITY QUAGMIRE OF INDIA'S NORTHEASTERN
MIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 marks a watershed moment in the global fight against racism. As protests erupted against systematic racism in America in the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd and continue till date, it is high time that we, Indians too, become conscious of the presence of similar patterns of racism in our own nation. This paper addresses the identity politics that have led to the impossibility of truly belonging to the fabric of Indian democracy for our neighbor-stranger northeasterners. It explores how this socio-politically disadvantaged and marginalized community challenges the idea of the post-1947 India as a vibrant democracy by exposing it as a concept essentially founded at the human cost of segregation.

Keywords: Racism, Racial Discrimination, North-East India, Post-Independence India, Axone

In 2013, two Swedish economists in the course of finding out whether economic freedom made people any more or less of a racist highlighted data from the World Values Survey which showed that India was among the 2 of the most racially intolerant nations out of the 81 nations that were surveyed with 40% of participants admitting that they did not want a neighbor of a different race.¹ The report raised a lot of questions by Indians who claimed that they weren't nearly half as racist as Americans. The truthfulness of this survey, however, was soon validated a year later on 29th January 2014, when a 20-year-old student of Lovely Professional University, Nido Tainam, the son of former Congress MLA Nido Pavitra from Arunachal Pradesh, who had come to the national capital in quest of educational opportunities with much hope, was beaten to death by a group of men in Lajpat Nagar, South Delhi, the reason being he simply looked 'different'.² The altercation started when a few shopkeepers made fun of his hairstyle that he protested and even though the police had intervened, it was not for long. When they later dropped both parties off at their initial location, he was beaten to death by a mob of 6 men. The outrage against alleged police inaction soon led to the case being handed over to the CBI who filed charges against the 4 accused- Farman, Pawan, Sundar Singh and Sunny Uppal. The charges of murder were dropped by the CBI during the filing of charge sheet citing Tainam's killing as the result of the brawl and not that of premeditated murder. Convicted under IPC sections 304 and 34, Pawan and Sunder were sentenced to 7 years and a fine of 20,000, Sunny Pal sentenced to 3 years and the main accused Farman was sentenced to 10 years but was granted interim bail on 19th May, 2020 after only 7 years of prison time by the Delhi HC despite the opposition of CBI while the 2 juveniles also accused were

released on probation for a period of one year. This was, however, not the first case of death by racism in India.³

A year ago in May 2013, Reingamphy Awungshi, a Tangkhul girl from Manipur was found mysteriously dead in her rented room in New Delhi. A year before that in 2012, a 21-year-old Mutum Bony from Imphal, Richard Loitam, a second-semester student of the Acharya NRV School of Architecture in Bangalore North and a 21-year-old Garo girl Dana Sangma all died due to racism.⁴ These are a just a few documented instances of racial discrimination that have led to death and yet there are innumerable other incidents over the years where these people have been mocked, ridiculed with racial slurs like 'Chinky', 'Chinese', 'Momo', 'Chowmein', 'Bahadur', 'Nepali Randi', 'Ching-Chong', 'Druggie' 'Dog Eaters' etc, harassed, humiliated, suspected, molested, beaten, looted, spat at, forcefully detained, locked in their own homes and faced other forms of violence such as being forced to lick the shoes of their house-owner and more. In response to Nido's case, the North East Support Centre and Helpline in a statement in 2014 said that it handles 15 to 20 distress calls from victims and witnesses of racial assaults each month which suggests the gravity of the issue.⁵

Nido's death formed a tragic landmark in the history of racism in India owing to the fact that it's sheer brutality for once, rekindled controversies, sparked marches and protests, lead to mainstream national and international coverage and widespread soul searching on race and racism in the nation, if only momentarily, to move on to petty politics in a day or two's time.

Students and northeastern communities across Delhi held demonstrations and protest marches demanding justice for Nido, equal representation and strict anti-racial laws. Northeasterners in various other parts of the nation, in extending solidarity, also came forward with their testimonies of suffering racism, both in public and in private. It hardly came as a surprise that the mainland politicians vying for a seat in the parliament in the 2014 general elections did not gloss over the spate of attacks against the minority community, as they usually do. The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Rahul Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, the prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi and the Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal all spoke out against the discrimination and sympathized with the protestors even as they were quick in playing the blame game with each pointing finger at the other instead of taking a united stand on the protection of northeast natives.⁶

While hate crimes against Indians in the west are quick to make it to make it headlines, those at home remain shunned by mainstream press. This was the first time that a case of racism in India had caught the attention of the significant English language print press like The Times of India, The Telegraph, The Hindu, The Indian Express, and Financial Express as well as many international ones like Al Jazeera.⁷ Following this incident, the Home Ministry and the Northeast Council also set up the Bezbaruah Committee, the first of its kind, on 21st February 2014 for protecting the well-being of northeasterners and even though it had recommended the existence of a stringent law as one of the first measures to combat the increasing menace of racism, such laws are still a distant dream for India.⁸

And yet it seems that the furor over the death of a student and the setting up of an individual committee solely dedicated to the welfare of the northeasterners has dissipated just as quickly and amounted to little change in the people's perspectives and attitude over the years as these migrants continue to be victims of hatred and abuse in the mainland. The global Covid situation in 2020 has witnessed a spate in racism owing to the misplaced anti-China prejudice targeting mainly the Chinese but also all those people tracing their ancestry to East Asia and in India this led to a rise in racial attacks and discrimination against the northeasterners across the country with them being beaten, spat at, verbally abused (nicknamed 'Corona'), refused at grocery stores, expelled from their rented homes and even hostels in esteemed educational institutions and in some cases being detained by the police and forcefully tested owing to anonymous complaints against them.⁹ On the other hand, a few months later, Indians across the nation as well as Bollywood celebrities have also gone on to demonstrate their solidarity to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, as they should, and yet it seems paradoxical that they should condemn racism in the west even as they remain incorrigibly insensitive to the plight of their fellow countrymen.¹⁰ This hypocrisy only goes on to highlight the precarious positioning of minorities along the fault lines of the new India.

Often lauded as the poster child of democracy, secularity and diversity, why then is India, that is home to nearly 2000 ethnic groups, being one of the most ethnically diverse nations in Asia, in its nationalist agenda of a future of relentless 'Development' and one that prioritizes exclusivity over the cultural tolerance of 'non-alignment' and syncretism has deteriorated into a nation where now the blatant infringing of the fundamental rights of a certain community is done not only by the common people but also the very pillars of the government, as we hear news of how 2 men from Manipur, out to buy groceries, were beaten by Koramangala police during the lockdown in Bengaluru?¹¹ What was once normalized as a few 'harmless' stereotypes and racial profiling over the years has aggravated our divisive mindset to the extent that now the institutions of law themselves have become a site of racial prejudice and yet, despite being a signatory of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the authorities in our country remain unwilling to acknowledge the existence of and apply the 'r' word in an official context in its own nation, often blithely dismissing these cases as sporadic incidents of violence.¹²

The major reasons often cited for racism in India are that the northeasterners have mongoloid face-types that apparently suggest Tibeto-Burman genes as opposed to Aryan or Dravidian ones and that their culture, history and geopolitics have always remained somewhat of an enigma to us, a separate entity that has almost never been assimilated into the mainstream historical narratives by India's political system.

The mongoloid facial structure of the northeasterners is starkly different from the common imaginary of Indian face-types which often results in them being misrecognised as foreigners and outsiders hailing from largely China but also Bhutan, Nepal and other South East Asian nations. Olaf Caroe in his 1940 paper titled 'The Mongolian Fringe' used the term, usually applied to the ethnicities of central and eastern Asia according to the prevailing theories of race, to refer to people from the northeast as being a population 'ethnologically and culturally not different from Tibetans and Mongoloids'. While such identification reliant on phenotype facial characteristics is pretty imprecise to say the least, it propelled the problematic myth of northeasterners being linked to Chinese heritage and hence labeled as essentially Chinese, Chinese sympathizers and agents, a concern that is well summed up in the words of India's first Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel to Jawaharlal Nehru following the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950 that "the existence on our side of a population with its affinities to the Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of the potential trouble between China and ourselves." This apparent lack of Indianness is what continues to marginalize and discriminate them. Yet strangely, while the mongoloid face shape of the northeastern people that they share with Chinese continues to land them in troubles here, the identicalities between the Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils or the Bengalis in West Bengal and those in Bangladesh or the Sikhs in India's Punjab and those in Pakistan goes completely unnoticed and therein lies the hypocrisy of the argument.

In a country that never tires of boasting its democratic credentials and is the self-claimed melting pot of cultures, the average Indian hardly knows much about the northeast beyond the stereotypes of being home to insurgents demanding political autonomy, terror attacks and the AFSPA law. The media only does more harm by focusing chiefly on its lush biodiversity and tribal culture that furthers the stereotypes of northeast being a wild frontier province. There is no sustained discourse on the northeast in the academic curriculum of either schools or universities or any other form of representation in historical curricula. Thus, since independence, the Indian education system has consistently secluded and silenced the histories of more than 45 million people.

Dr Sukanya Sharma, professor of Archeology and Cultural Studies at IIT Guwahati, in a conversation with The Bastion mentions how the colonial intention to isolate the northeast for its own benefits and label these tribal communities as uncivilized and savage has more or less continued post-independence.¹³ Neither the cultural and political prowess of the northeast nor their efforts in India's freedom struggle have made it to public understanding and though the NCERT in 2017 commissioned the 'North East India: People, History and Culture' with the aim of increasing interest in the northeast, it is still far from giving substantial anti-racist education/cultural sensitivity training or even clarifying why it only took 73 years to do something like this. Despite being a democracy, modern India with its selective readings of an 'Indian' past seemingly continues with the colonial administrative strategies. To top it all, the present government's emphasis on policies of 'One

Nation, One Identity', 'One Nation, One Language' and so on which are essentially the remnants of the colonial mindset of being superficially unified, is trying to forcefully amalgamate all cultures and communities of India into one homogenous entity which would only go on to kill these regional cultures.

Bollywood, the one platform that has time and again taken up social issues like domestic violence, sex trafficking, bullying, workplace harassment and more has sadly remained mute to the struggles of the northeastern people. No interest in this issue as a main theme for a film (and not as a sub-theme like in 'Chak De! India') has been shown by any major production house until now and there has been little representation of people from the northeast in Bollywood with their actors like Adil Hussain, Andrea Tariang, Danny Denzongpa etc being largely relegated to secondary or villain roles.¹⁴ Axone, (named after the traditional pork delicacy from Nagaland) a recently released critically acclaimed Netflix film by Khasi director Nicholas Khargonkor and starring Sayani Gupta, Indo-Tibetan actor Tenzin Dalha along with an actual cast from the northeast like Lin Laishram, Asenla Jamir, Merenla Imsong, Lanuakum Ao and Adil Hussain (instead of casting anomalies like Priyanka Chopra for the Manipuri boxer Mary Kom) follows a day in the life of a group of friends living in Delhi, India's North-East Harlem.¹⁵ The Indian culture of all perceiving misogyny and sexism is especially harsh on the northeastern women who have to bear the brunt of the two-pronged mainland discrimination-racism and sexism and are constantly targeted by the men from mainland because they supposedly seem 'easy picking' owing to their fashionable looks and bold lifestyles. This intersectional discrimination is aptly highlighted as we see men fantasizing out loud in public about having sex with Chanbi, one of the female leads and yet when she confronts them, nobody in the vicinity comes to her aid. We see the girls threatened to be thrown out by their bigoted neighbors for cooking the titular pungent delicacy in their own home and people making crass comments like "malai", "tum sab ek jaise dikhte ho", "iski toh aakhein bhi nahi khuli abhi tak", "jackie chan ka birthday hai kya?" and more about their appearances, outfits and customs. The seeming antipathy of the non axone eaters towards the consumption of axone also reminds us of the dichotomies in the mainlander's attitude towards the tribal consumption of pork and dog meat who on the one hand, are highly vocal about the plight of these animals that are being eaten and yet otherwise do not give a passing thought to the stray animals who are left to fend for themselves or the other animals that are consumed by the populace such as chicken and fish and are hugely ignorant of the cultural habits and culinary traditions of the northeast.

Axone exposes how the racism experienced by northeast communities has become a problem of metropolitan India and not merely that of life in the borderland under draconian laws and exceptional governance provisions. The biases depicted are not unheard of and yet to see how the casual racism has been internalized as a part of their daily lives is tragic. We realize that in the absence of any external solidarity and support, they band together and intermingle, not as a deliberate choice but rather as a survival mechanism. This all-too familiar issue is depicted in the film as well where we see the girls being criticized for not befriending other people and trying to supposedly create their own Northeast in Delhi even as Indian immigrants, all over the world too, build an ethnocentric community of their own wherever they go and yet this becomes not a sign of resilience but weakness and even arrogance in the film on the part of the migrants. The film however, is not perfect in its voicing of the concerns of the Northeasterners. What slightly undercuts the powerfulness of the film's portrayal of the racial politics of food is the ambivalent attitude towards the cooking of axone where on the one hand, the girls have to really strive to cook it in their own home secretly, on the other hand, the girl who is supposed to cook, herself, pinches her nose at the smell of the axone that she goes on to cook. Moreover Shiv's search for a northeast girlfriend, though depicted as cute and harmless can yet be interpreted as a fetishization of the Northeastern female. Nevertheless, the film is pioneering in itself what with its social commentary on the 'othering' of these people as they face overwhelming obstacles just to celebrate a friend's wedding never becoming didactic, lightened by observational humor and the romance angle and yet forming an adequately impactful reminder of how the people from the northeast have been left out of the conversation of the makings of modern India for long.¹⁶

After years of civil unrest, the northeast is still far from peace as it continues being plagued by ethnic, linguistic, gender based and cultural conflicts with the rest of the nation. India still has a long way to go as it

unlearns its prejudices and becomes safe for others who experience things that aren't the majority population's lived experiences. Beyond the 'Incredible Northeast India', 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies, the government's real measures have been rather lackadaisical and its response to racism never extending beyond performative outrage to non-optical allyship. The developmental lag in the northeast leading to mass migration to the metro cities, the lack of awareness due to historical amnesia and prejudices resulting from racial phenotypes, the perceived geographical distance and the apparent language barrier has created what The Hindu once called as 'divided neighborhoods' and while these states may only be at an arm's length from the mainland India in theory, their people are infinitely away in terms of acceptance and integration, left barely as second class citizens or foreigners but not in the status of white foreigners.¹⁷ To sum up, India's continued selective appreciation of its founding ideals, even 73 years after its independence, makes it a paradox where democracy exists only during elections, secularity only in writing, Nehru's ideal of unity in diversity is yet to be realized and the notions of social justice that the constitution affords the minorities is flimsy.

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