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Understanding Language and Culture: Bridging the Gap between Delhi City and Northeast Students

K. B. Veio Pou Suraj Mal, Mr. Kedar Prasad Meena,
Razwan Ashraf, Azeem Mehmood, Divya Pahuja, Diksha Bhatia, Ishani
Jiggyasu, Vaishali Kapoor, Vrinda Tambi, Sukanya Karnwal, Pretty
Pamei, Arvind Tomar

veiopou@gmail.com

Department of English, Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi
Shiekh Sarai – II, New Delhi – 110017

ABSTRACT

The inability to understand other's culture leads to huge disparity and misjudgment. Often, it is the lack of respect for someone's cultural practices that causes many undesired hostilities. In the recent past the students from Northeast who have come to study and work in the city of Delhi have been subjected to various kinds of discrimination because of their different physical appearance and cultural habits. Often, they are gullible to the many miscreants in the streets because of language problem too. The project, therefore, seek to help understand the various problems of Northeast students in the city because of their cultural habits and language barrier. The end result would enable these young people to identify ways to adapt to the environment and culture of Delhi and also help them understand the different cultures of India, in general. The project is also aimed at creating a harmonious environment whereby the various kinds of misunderstanding between the locals and students of Northeast in Delhi are done away with. The team involved in the project did some sociological survey of the problems that the Northeast students face specifically in terms of cultural practices and linguistic disabilities. Besides, the team also looked into the stories on discrimination because of racial orientation and explored how their problems are represented in the media.

Keywords: Cultural practices, Delhi, discrimination, language barrier, misunderstanding, Northeast students

INTRODUCTION

The unfortunate death of Nido Tania, a student from Arunachal Pradesh, in January 2014 allegedly because he was manhandled the previous day by some local youths at Lajpat Nagar, a prime location in the city of Delhi following an argument on his appearance, led to a huge uproar in the capital of the country. What followed in the

next many months was the angry protests by the Northeast students against racial discrimination. But the protest movement was only a culmination of a long due agitation that was in the hearts of the Northeastern communities against the various forms of discrimination reported in the city over the years. In order to look into the safety of people from the Northeastern region the government at the centre quickly set up a sub-committee called the Bezbaruah Committee¹, with a number of high profile names as members in the committee.

It may also be noted that in the exodus of Northeastern people from different cities of the country in the middle of 2012 following the Assam violence had awoken the thinking minds of the country. While it also raised many questions on identity and safety, another important question was brought to the fore – is the region really integrated to the rest of the country, both emotionally and physically. Quite often the people groups of the Northeast are misunderstood to be a homogeneous community, but the ground reality says a different thing. Many cultural, linguistic and racial groups cohabit the region which geographically constitute the seven sister states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. (Sikkim was added as the eighth state in 2003, but since it is not geographically contiguous and also doesn't share a historical background with the rest of the states it somehow stands aloof. And even after more than a decade of it being added to be part of the Northeastern states there is no visible attachment developed.) The Northeast is connected to the rest of the country only through the Siliguri corridor, which is also called the 'chicken neck', while the rest are international boundaries bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal. In a way, the relation between the region and the rest of the country can also be picturized by the map of India that shows the 'peripheral' Northeast on the verge of collapsing from the 'mainland'! However, it is not just this geographical isolation that has made the Northeast a 'periphery' of the country but is also the inability to find kinship, culturally and racially, with the people groups of the 'mainland'. Even though the Indo-Aryan race makes up a huge percentage of the region's population, the fact that they are localized to few states (Assam and Tripura primarily) make the region appear as a Mongoloid heartland of the country since the rest of the states are inhabited by Mongoloid people. And it is when people from these states go out of the region that they are considered 'outsider' because of the way they look.

Even today, the estrangement is clearly visible from the kind of reception to the people from this region when they move out of their home states. Being referred to as 'Chinky' (a derogatory term used India to refer to those who have narrow eyes),

1 The Bezbaruah Committee was constituted and notified on 05-02-2014 with Shri. M. P Bezbaruah, IAS (Retd.), Member North Eastern Council, as Chairman and following members: Shri Alemtemshi Jamir, Shri. H. W. T Syiem, Shri. P. Bharat Singh, Shri Tape Bagra, Dr. H. T. Sangliana, Shri. D. M. Jamatia, Dr. (Ms) Doma Bhutia, Shri J. Maivio, Shri J. T. Taggam, representatives from North East India Forum Against Racism and North East Helpline. Besides, Shri. Robin Hibu, Jt CP (Delhi Police) was nominated as representative of Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to assist the committee and Shri. S. Saha, Deputy Secretary, MHA as member secretary.

‘Oriental’, etc. because of their ‘looks’ or worse still being asked if they are from ‘China’ or ‘Nepal’ make the Northeasterners feel out of place in different cities of India. Even in university campuses they somehow feel out of place and do not feel quite at home. It is not new for a Northeasterner even in a metropolitan city like Delhi to be asked, ‘Where is Manipur?’ or ‘Where is Nagaland?’ or ‘Where is Mizoram?’ when they name their place of origin while on the search for jobs, accommodation, etc. While such stereotyping may not be uncommon in India, these visual images concocted to refer to a group might connote certain differing implications. To the peoples of Northeast region the citation is closely linked to an unstable political relation with the post-colonial/post-independent India. From the difference in racial orientation to the linguistic barrier to the food habits which is distasteful to the locals, there are many issues that needs to be addressed. And this project hopes to promote harmony and understanding between different cultures of the country. Quite often it is the misunderstanding of other's culture that results in unfortunate happenings even in a multicultural place like Delhi.

Over the years migration of young people from the Northeast have drastically increased. And so also crimes against them. Though there have been calls on the government to step up measures to look into the problems faced by them, all of those went to deaf ears. The report of the Bezbaruah Committee clearly made some pressing points why “special measures” are needed for safety of Northeast people in the city of Delhi:

First, the number of incidents involving the people from the North East is proportionately very high considering the small number of people from the region living in Delhi. Secondly, the number of incidents of racial nature, molestation, prejudices, specially directed towards North East communities, are also seen to be growing. There is growing perception withing the people from the North East communities that they are particularly targeted for reasons of their difference in physical features. Third, because of such incidents, a large number of youths from the region grow up in the Capital with negative feelings. Their widespread experience of being subjected to taunts, humiliation and racial attacks in the capital city and other metros make them feel bitter, angry and frustrated. Fourth, what is more worrisome is the messages that goes back from such experiences to the North East region. They fuel the already strong feeling of alienation among the youth and encourage separatist movements. The feeling that the authorities are apathetic to such concerns aggravates such tendencies. (p. 5)

Undeniably, the report pinpoints the various needs that demands immediate attention from the public as well as from the government. Quite often, there are questions from some quarters why special measures is required for a particular set of communities arguing that such steps may only alienate them further. But the bare facts and figures mentioned in the report are reasons enough for separate measures for the Northeast people who are vulnerable to unwanted incidents until such a time when they can be treated with fairness. One thing needed at the moment is also an education of the masses who are ignorant of the cultures of the Northeast.

It may also be interesting to note that in December a report of a survey on discrimination against Northeast people in the Delhi-NCR region conducted by the Reach Out Foundation² reports that as high as 67 percent of the people had faced discrimination because of their ethnic/racial origin. And the major cause against such discrimination, according to the study, is prejudice and lack of understanding of the Northeast:

The major cause for discrimination that emerged from the survey was prejudice and lack of awareness about the Northeast people. 64 per cent respondents said the reason behind discrimination is the lack of understanding/ awareness about people from the Northeast. 13 per cent claimed that it is the indifference towards people from the Northeast by others that lead to discrimination against them. While 20 per cent said that the major cause of discrimination is lack of interaction among the people from Northeast and others. (pp. 30-31)

Some of the objectives of the project includes identifying ways to let students of the Northeast adapt well to the environment and culture of Delhi. Sensitizing them to learn the dominant language of the city, Hindi, could help them in avoiding many unwanted incidents because of language barrier. Taking up a study like this, it is also hoped, would not just do away with the various myths of stereotyped understanding of other cultures but also help develop a sense of respect for the richness of India's cultures and overcome the psychological gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The project is primarily a sociological survey of the problems that Northeast people face in the city of Delhi. The team involved were grouped into three and the study was made into a three-pronged research work. The first research area was focused on visiting universities, police stations and other administrative offices in order to understand the various kinds of problems faced by Northeast students while trying to avail opportunities. The second area was on studying the migrants from Northeast settled in different localities of Delhi. On identifying four key localities interviews were conducted to try and look into the possible frictions between the locals and the migrants. The third area of focus was doing a comparative study of media coverage/reportage on incidents involving the Northeast people in the city and to understand if the same news was reported similarly by national newspapers /magazines and some leading newspapers /magazines based in the Northeast.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To have a comprehensive understanding of the situation of Northeastern youths in Delhi, two documents which were published in the recent years were considered for review. First is a book by Duncan MacDuie-Ra called *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (2012). It is an ethnographic study of the Northeastern people as migrants in a cosmopolitan city like Delhi. Identifying some select localities in the city where the Northeast communities populate, the author gave a detailed study of the reasons for coming to Delhi, their conditions in the city and the

2 Reach Out Anti-Discrimination Project: Delhi-NCR Survey 2014 was released on 6 December 2014. For details see <http://reachoutfoundation.org.in/projects.html>

various challenges that lie ahead. One of the thrust areas of the book lies in the detailed study on the 'push' and 'pull' factors for migration. Undeniably, one of the key push factor for young people leaving the Northeast region is the lack of a conducive environment in the region, ranging from the conflict and violence that mar peace and stability, the lack of good institutes for students and the want of opportunities for the young generation. The pull factor to the city of Delhi is the vastness of opportunities not only for employment but also availability of premier institutes for students and aspirants for competitive examinations. Of course, Delhi is always the preferred destination for most people from other regions of the country too.

The second is a monograph of the V. V. Giri National Labour Institute Research Studies Series titled "Migration from North-East to Urban Centres: A Case Study of Delhi Region" (2012) by Bapu P. Ramesh. The study mainly looks at the trends of migration of people from the Northeast for employment reasons. One of the important determinants, writes the author, is the bleak employment prospect in the local labour market in the Northeast. It also points to the rise of the educated unemployed youth in the region. Besides, the political unrest and poverty are also cited as prominent reasons for youth to migrate to urban centres. Concluding with the remark that the migration from the Northeast is "quite unique" because of the educational and employment advantages attached to the youths from the region even in a city like Delhi, Ramesh also suggests that the host city should be oriented of the region's rich cultural background so that the growing gap be bridged.

RESULTS

The results and findings of the field works are discussed and further divided into three sections.

Efforts were made to visit police stations, universities, etc. to interview concerned officials and students. One of the significant outcomes in this area was the stress on the need to change perception of other's culture. And also the need to sensitize the Northeast youths of the local cultures. In one of the interviews, a Sub-Inspector at Malviya Nagar said that Northeast people are well-cultured, educated, reasonable and very open minded. However, being good natured all the time also lead to being taken advantage by the locals at times. He feels that both the Northeast people and the people of Delhi need to be sensitized of each other's culture and tradition. Not just the people but the police too need to be sensitized, he remarked. The recent moves by the Delhi police to recruit large numbers of people from the Northeast into its force is seen as a welcome move by many. It may also be noted that sometime in the middle of 2014 the Delhi police also launched a website exclusively to provide assistance in case of any forms of discrimination against the Northeast people³. Besides, taking advantage of the social media, on May 9 of the same year, it also created a Facebook page (Delhi Police For North East Folks) to effectively reach out especially to young people. And within three weeks of the launch of the Facebook page it had received

3 Shri Robin Hibu, JCP, is the Nodal Officer for this Special Cell of the Delhi Police. More information can be found in their website www.dpfne.com

5500 complaints and suggestions⁴. That indeed speaks volume on the importance of an agency to address the growing needs of the Northeast people in cities.

The second area of focus was in trying to understand the recent wave of huge migration of youths from Northeast India to Delhi, not only in pursuit of education but also for various employment opportunities. But do the residents of a 'developed' city like Delhi welcome them with open arms? How does the capital of a country with its motto as 'unity in diversity' respond to the aberrant discriminations that gets reported frequently? To find out the answers of the above questions we took personal interviews of North East migrants staying in localities namely Munirka, Chirag Dilli, Moti Bagh and Gurgaon. The focus here was not only to those from the Northeast but also extracting opinions from the members of the host city, Delhi/NCR. Though some refused to even talk to us fearing we might cause them harm, others very politely stated their troublesome predicament. On interviewing some people, it dawned upon us that many in the capital city of India are still reluctant to accept people from certain region as fellow countrymen. More often people from far off regions are victims of molestation, harassment and envy. For those from the Northeast, it is also the political and social pressure made them migrate hoping that they could earn a better living. Women are doubly subjected to more discrimination through eve-teasing. A Northeastern girl studying at DU on being asked about her stay in Delhi, she said, "This populous city is not at all safe for me. Every day I have to hear the terms 'chinki' or 'chini malai', even from the rickshaw pullers." Also a noticeable incident that took place in Gurgaon was brought to light by a Northeastern salespersons working in a shopping mall. A boy from the Northeast had been abused over some money matter and was cruelly killed by some local goons. Despite such worsening situation people still migrate to Delhi/NCR for job and employment. It is sad to hear from people how dangerous it is for these migrants to live and survive in a metropolitan city like Delhi. What acts as an icing on the cake is, "Police konsa kum discriminate karti hai" (Even the police don't discriminate less), a statement by a salon manager from Manipur. "Agar police ka pas chale toh woh humein dilli mein bhi na ghusne de!" (If we approach the police they won't even let us enter Delhi) said a DU student residing in Munirka. Although on one hand, these young people from Northeast are hesitant in seeking help from the local people, the view of the locals is seen to be somewhere contrasting the mindset of Northeast people against them. Some locals feel that they are posing a threat to their job opportunities due to their higher intelligence. But some are of a different; "We are the one's providing them with living accommodations. So the point of excluding them from our society is totally invalid." However, discrimination can take ugly turns any moment. Many Delhiites refused to even be a part of the interview saying that the matter does not relate to them.

The third area of research was a survey of some prominent newspapers and magazines based in the Northeast in reporting about incidents involving the Northeast

4 For details see <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-otherstates/delhi-police-facebook-page-for-northeast-a-hit/article6073709.ece>

people in Delhi and compare with how the same pieces of news were reported in some of the national dailies. Since the death of Nido Tania there has been much furor over the increasing racial discrimination on Northeast people. There is a general sense of apathy from the national media – print as well as electronic – by giving relatively lesser space to news involving Northeast states and its subjects as compared to other states that gets due share of reportage. Often it is not the 'incident' that gets reported but the built-up consequence of the same that gets reported. For example, although the incident of beating up of the Northeast girl and her counsels at Tis Hazari Court got reported in major newspapers, the actual incident of harassment in the metro station the previous didn't get reported. Be it *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* or *Times Now* – which have a zero tolerance approach over a non-Northeasterns been harassed or subjected to discrimination – not many news organizations (including electronic media) have reported the incident of molestation. On the other hand, *The Northeast Today*, *The Sentinel*, *Arunachal Times*, etc. gave a much clearer picture of what happened. At other times too, it's either a killing or rape that merits the reportage in major newspapers and not the daily instances of discrimination in the form of racial abuses, social stereotyping and disrespect of identity and culture. On the other hand, migrants of North India in Maharashtra being discriminated is made a huge new of and a lewd remarks or digital messages sent to any Bollywood actor is given due share of reportage. Sometimes it looks like the media only waits for stories on Northeast to flare up in order to be reported, like the incident of May 30, 2013 when the Malviya Nagar Police station refusing to lodge an FIR against the death of a girl from Manipur. Media attention was drawn in only when hundreds of people from the Northeast protested against Delhi Police in front of the police station.

CONCLUSION

Migrating to greener pastures is a fact of life. That is what human beings have been doing since the earliest of times. However, the modern day migration from villages to towns to cities can be analyzed in different contexts. The outflow of young people from the Northeast in large numbers to the metros of the country is of a recent one. Though educational pursuits have attracted students to the big cities of the country since the early decades of independence, it is the new millennium phenomenon of bulk migration from the Northeastern frontier of the country that demands attention. And though studies have cited the uncomfortable reality of stay in a city like Delhi, there are still people pouring in by the numbers every year. That is something that has not been engaged properly in studies or report that were taken into consideration while working on this project. From the few studies taken into consideration, some notable factors stand out. Most people believe that the conflict situation is the main reason for young people leaving the region. However, such observations are also heightened by media and stories of old. Often media only reportage on the Northeast is largely dominated by conflicts/violence and ignore the various issues that are pertinent in the region. Besides, not all states have a history of conflict and some states have been relatively peaceful.

For various reasons the Northeast continued to be misconstrued even today. But this can be bridged if the region is projected in a positive light. The media could

contribute a lot here. Many people from different parts of the region are doing their bit in contributing to the betterment of the society. The growing educational ventures, the emerging literatures, the vibrant cultures of different communities, the tradition of music, the beautiful landscape, the rich flora and fauna, etc. in the region could be focused, rather than the sporadic conflicts that mar the social fabric of the region. Every society has its own share of negatives and positives; whichever gets promoted tends to shape the image of the society. Reporting the negatives only alienates the region from the minds of those who have never been there.

Needless to say, there is a dire need to improve the infrastructure in educational system and focus on creating employment opportunities in the region in order to deal with the outflow of youths from the region for education and employment. The young people in the region are at a crossroad. Though many manage to leave the region to find opportunities, the bulk of them find no appropriate avenues to invest their energy. And even among those who leave their states to study only the best are absorbed in the employment sectors of their choice. The rest find nowhere to head. Announcing packages for the Northeast every time a new government comes to power has not really translated into reality. There is a general sense among Northeastern people that Indian government's apathy is only leaving scope for the growth of anti-social elements in the region. Just because money is being poured into the region doesn't mean that it is being implemented. Rather it only gives rise to corruption. What is wanted is a medium to oversee if the funds are channelized in the right direction.

An area recommendable for research on the Northeast in cities could be to focus on a holistic study. Rather than surveying only on Delhi being a hostile place of stay, research could also be done on how the city is also the home of many successful people from the Northeast, from the government to the private sectors. This positive portrayal of success could boost both the morale of the host city and the ones from the frontier. For the host city that could help its portrayal of being a home to diverse cultures of the country. For those from the far-flung areas like the Northeastern folks it could reassure them that the city is after all not hostile all the time as it is portrayed. Yes, facing discrimination in the city is a reality, as the media and several reports on the Northeast population in the capital city of Delhi says. But that should not deter the spirit of the cosmopolitan-multicultural space the city is. And I think there is hope that things can improve. The Reach Out Foundation reports also found out that most people look up to the government agencies to eliminate discrimination, while a good percentage thinks social organizations can help and still a fair percentage says that the ethnic communities themselves can play a role in reducing discrimination. And in the recent times, I think, the government is doing its bit to tackle this issue, which is an encouraging move. A Special Cell in the Delhi Police has been set up to look into the grievances of the Northeastern people in the city, as also mentioned above. At the University of Delhi level too, office orders have been issued to each college to appoint Nodal Officers who can oversee and ensure safety of the students. And initiatives like the Gyanodaya Educational Trip by the University of Delhi can help foster learning about India's diversity. The recently concluded one was themed as "Dharohar: The Glory of the Northeast" (18th to 29th December 2014) and took the students and teachers by train to most states of the region. Such institutional

initiatives can surely help bridge the emotional and geographical gap in the minds of many Indians from other parts of the region. Being too little taught in schools, the region is too little understood. There is an increasing visibility of efforts taken by different organizations to sensitize people on the cultures and history of the Northeast. The evolution of a non-governmental organizations like North East Support Centre and Helpline have also emboldened the victims of discrimination to come forward and pursue their cases.

As far as the linguistic barrier faced by the students of Northeast is concerned, one of the ways to overcome would be to initiate a kind of a remedial course for Hindi. Since most of the students have weak background to Hindi at school level, encouraging them to learn the language will help them in the long run. This could be done at the institute level through the help of some teachers to develop a suitable module. The need to learn the language of the mass should be pressed upon the students. Though English can give them the access to institutes and places of work, the lay person who makes up the bulk of the population will always try to beguile someone who doesn't speak Hindi. Often, the scuffles that young Northeasterners fall into are those with the auto drivers, the rickshaw pullers, the grocery vendors, the people on the street, etc. and they cannot be argued with unless one is well-versed with Hindi. It is my own experience that the understanding the host culture, knowing Hindi in this case, can reduce the trend of discrimination to a good extend. Another step that could help the Northeasterners feel at home in a city like Delhi is by helping themselves claim their equal rights to be a Delhiite like anyone else from other parts of the country. However, that is not an easy step to take when there are more people out in the streets who try to make you feel an 'outsider'. Yet, for those who assert their belongingness, the city is much more a livable place. The other area that the young Northeast people could do is not just be limited to one's own folks. This I often tell my students too. Studying in a university/college where students from different regions of the country come to interact, there is too much to lose when one always hang around with familiar faces. Though I understand that the Northeast students feel more confident to be among themselves, share cultural habits and think alike. However, in the long run it does not help in their growth. I have seen only a few who are willing to mingle with non-Northeastern students. A cosmopolitan city like Delhi has so much to offer to those who venture out.

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