



Tackling the Racist Attacks on Indians from North-East

We definitely have a lot of ground to cover in light of very disturbing and disconcerting developments affecting our nation-building process in recent times. While one can definitely deal with an identified enemy within and without the border, it is really difficult to nail those living amongst us and masquerading as citizens. There are some citizens who, intentionally or unintentionally, are weakening the evolution of nationalist tendencies in the country. The nationalist feeling, the so-called 'we feeling' that Benedict Anderson once visualised as a desideratum for his 'imagined community' to constitute a strong, well-bonded nation-state still appears elusive if we look around and cognize some of the developments in our civil society.

The alleged 'racist behaviour' among Indians against some of our fellow citizens has emerged as a cause of serious concern lately. The fatal attack on Nido Tania, a young boy from Arunachal Pradesh in a South Delhi market recently resulting in his tragic death, suspicious death of a young Manipuri woman in her flat in South Delhi's Munirka, the assault on two Nagaland youths in Gurgaon and merciless beating of a Manipuri student leader in Bangalore for not speaking Kannada are some of the recent instances of violence against our fellow citizens from the North-East.

The Central Government is said to have taken a series of measures to ensure safety of citizens from North-Eastern states in New Delhi and elsewhere. They include regular police patrolling of colonies where people from North-Eastern states live, starting exclusive helpline for them, race and gender sensitisation programmes and speedy disposal of such cases. Today, we also have a Minister of State (Independent Charge) for the North-East Region. The reinforced attention and concerted measures have been taken following the death of Nido Tania to ensure the safety of people from the region in the National Capital Region.

Earlier in 2012, in an attempt to prevent racial discrimination against people from North-East, Indian Government had asked all the states and union territories to book anyone who

commits an act of atrocity or crime against people from the region under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. A predominant majority of people from the North-East have the protection of this central legislation available to them by dint of their belonging to one or the other tribe as scheduled in the this Act. A person found guilty for non-bailable offences under this Act can be imprisoned for five years.

As per a study, an estimated two lakh people from the North-East have migrated to Delhi between 2005 and 2013 as also have many times more people from the other provinces of India. According to the Union Home Ministry, crimes against the people from the North-Eastern states have reportedly gone up by 270 per cent during the past three years. The Home Ministry data also confirm that crimes against people from the North-Eastern states increased from 27 in 2011 to 73 in 2013. The crimes that witnessed the highest increase were in keeping with the national pattern though and inter alia included molestation, rape and hurt. While molestation increased by 177 per cent during the period, rape cases increased from one in 2011 to 17 in 2013.

The data give credence to observations by the Government appointed M P Bezbaruah Committee that 'people from the North-Eastern states are racially discriminated against in Delhi'. The 11-member Committee, formed in the wake of the dastardly attack on Arunachal Pradesh student Nido Tania, submitted its report to the Government recently where it held that 86 per cent of the North-Eastern Indians living in Delhi have faced some sort of racial discrimination. The Committee in its report has stated that people from the North-Eastern states faced more problems in Delhi than in other metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and Kolkata. It also said that over two-thirds of women from North-East had reported that they faced harassment and discrimination in Delhi.

The Committee in its 82-page report, inter alia, has recommended the institution of fast track courts and special police squads, integrating each and every aspect of the North-East into the consciousness of people outside the region through educational interventions, increasing social media outreach and legal awareness campaigns, having earmarked residential facilities to address the accommodation problem faced by North-East people, holding regular national and international events in the North-East to create greater harmony and better understanding, making such offences with racial overtones into cognisable and non-bailable offences and expediting disposal of such cases.

Many citizens from the North-East India have complained that they have been stereotyped by such characterisations as 'Chinky', 'Hakka', 'Nepali', 'Chinese' and 'Chow Mein' by people in Delhi, with reference to their facial features, particularly the appearance of their eyes. For the distinct style including sartorial and tonsorial, tradition, culture, music, dance and more distinct facial features, they are said to become easy preys to outrageous remarks and alleged racial attacks. In 2007, the North-East Support Centre and Helpline (NESC&H) was started with the determined object of increasing awareness of prejudices and attacks against people from the North-East. The Centre (NESC&H) was launched with the express purpose to provide assistance to those from the North-Eastern community who face various forms of alleged discrimination.

In the wake of back-to-back alleged racial attacks on people from North-East in Delhi and elsewhere, the influential North-East Students' Organisation (NESO) has rightly demanded the curricular changes by inclusion of the history, geography and cultures of the people of North-East in our school syllabi. 'In major cities in India, people from the North-East are often mistaken for foreigners by some people. They have to be educated. The only way we can educate them is by incorporating the history, geography and cultures of the people of North-East in the school syllabi,' NESO Chairman Samuel Jyrwa opined recently. 'No law, no matter how stringent it is, can stop the racial attacks. The problem is in the mindset and it has to change. The problem is also about people's ignorance that there is an India beyond West Bengal,' he said.

Against this background, what are needed, apart from strong policing and exemplary punitive measures against such offences, are more institutionalised inter-cultural exchanges and interactions, culture sensitisation exercises including inclusion of specific chapters in school syllabus for inculcation of healthy, eclectic and cosmopolitan mindset and attitude vis-a-vis people from diverse cultures and regions, not to speak of encouraging more inter-caste, inter-regional and inter-faith marriages. We definitely need to outgrow these archaic, anachronistic, pathological, and abhorrent leftovers from our past and build a broader consensus to ensure the emergence of a more tolerant and progressive India from the womb of our nation-building process. The sooner we complete our odyssey from being the state-nation to a nation-state, the better.

Salient points

- While one can definitely deal with an identified enemy within and without the border, it is really difficult to nail those living amongst us and masquerading as citizens.
- The alleged 'racist behaviour' among Indians against some of our fellow citizens has emerged as a cause of serious concern lately.
- Concerted measures have been taken following the death of Nido Tania to ensure the safety of people from the NE region in the National Capital Region.
- A predominant majority of people from the North-East have the protection under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.
- Many citizens from the North-East India have complained that they have been stereotyped by such characterisations as 'Chinky', 'Hakka', 'Nepali', 'Chinese' and 'Chow Mein' by people in Delhi, with reference to their facial features, particularly the appearance of their eyes.
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Glossary

Desideratum: something wanted or needed