



OPINION / BHUTAN

Student's death and India's racism debate

Nido Taniam's killing illustrates the prejudices that people from the northeast face in their bid to integrate.



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Hundreds of students protested after Nido Taniam was killed in a street brawl [EPA]

The soul-searching on race and racism in India that has followed the death of Nido Taniam, a 20-year-old student from the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, after he was assaulted in New Delhi is promising. Introspection about racism at home is rare in India, though hate crimes against Indians in Australia, Europe or North America often make front-page news.

Taniam died as the result of a brutal beating in a busy New Delhi shopping area. The fatal brawl broke out when a few men hurled racial insults at Taniam and he refused to acquiesce. Delhi has witnessed many such incidents in recent years.

The fledgling North East Support Centre and Helpline says it handles 15 to 20 distress calls from victims and witnesses of racial assaults each month. Organisations of Delhites with roots in Northeast India have long complained that the Delhi police do not take these incidents seriously.

Since Taniam's death, those cries have received a more sympathetic hearing from Delhi's wider public. Leading politicians such as Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal have come to the protests to express solidarity.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has met Taniam's parents and has assured them that the guilty would be punished.

But while activists speak of racial discrimination and hate crimes, official India is reluctant to use the 'r' word. India's Home Ministry has formed a committee to inquire into "the various kinds of concerns of the persons hailing from the North Eastern States who are living in different parts of the country, especially the metropolitan areas".

But there is no explicit reference to race and racism in the committee's mandate. Yet, young Northeasterners in Delhi argue that no effective response is possible unless these incidents are recognised as racial in character and as hate crimes.

At first glance, the idea that a regionally identified group of people - the Northeasterners - can be racially marked and targeted may be confusing.

Perhaps a more explicit racial vocabulary of an earlier era would be less mystifying. A 1940 official paper authored by Olaf Caroe, the then foreign secretary of the British-Indian government, was titled 'The Mongolian Fringe'.

'The Mongolian Fringe'

Caroe used the term to refer to the people of the Himalayan region, including areas

such as "Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and northern Assam".

In Caroe's colonial geo-political vision, the peoples of that region are predominantly 'Mongolian'. The term, according the prevailing scientific theories of race of that time, applied to the peoples of central and eastern Asia, including Tibetans, Chinese and the Japanese.

The divide between "Mongolians" and the inhabitants of "India proper" was self-evident to Caroe and other British colonial officials. But they were not alone in taking that view.

Following the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950, independent India's first Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru: "All along the Himalayas in the north and north-east, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnologically and culturally not different from Tibetans and Mongoloids."

He warned that the undefined border with China and "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."

Six decades later, large numbers of people from Caroe's Mongolian Fringe live in Delhi and other Indian metropolitan cities.

Of course, since the identification of a person as 'Mongolian' or 'Northeastener' is ultimately reliant on phenotypic facial characteristics, these are inherently imprecise terms.

Thus what Indians think of as the stereotypical 'Northeastern looks' may apply not only to people from the eight states of India's Northeastern region, but to people of Nepali, Bhutanese, Tibetan or Burmese ethnicity as well.

It isn't a surprise therefore that before the BRICS summit held Delhi in March 2012, while trying to prevent protests by Tibetan exiles against the Chinese president, the Delhi police questioned and rounded up not only Tibetans, but many Northeasterners as well.

Racial targeting

In the past few decades, the disruptions caused by armed conflicts in Northeast Indian states had forced many young people to look for opportunities in the rest of the country.

Apart from the educational opportunities available in Delhi and other major Indian cities, job opportunities that opened up during India's recent economic boom also became a magnet for migrants from Northeast India.

Particularly noticeable in the Delhi of recent years is the large number of Northeasterners working in restaurants, shopping malls, hotels, spas, call centres and the airline industry.

The English-speaking skills and the 'Oriental' looks of young Northeasterners - and of women in particular - appear to be in great demand in those new consumer spaces where Indians aspire to 'live abroad in India'.

The number of Northeasterners now living in Delhi is estimated to be at least 200,000.

But the encounter between 'mainland Indians' and the Mongolian fringe in these twenty-first century urban spaces has not always been smooth.

For instance, the eating habits of many Northeasterners - fermented dry fish, beef chutney and pork - don't sit well with Indians who take Hindu vegetarianism to be the national norm.

Many Northeast Indians take pride in their affinity for western music or fluency in the English language - cultural capital that not only challenges the mainlander's stereotypes of the region as 'backward', it creates certain status dissonance as well.

The language of race may no longer be acceptable, but there is a 'racialised regime of visibility' (in the words of the Cultural Studies scholar Joseph Pugliese) to take its place. Northeasterners in Delhi complain of confronting derogatory words like 'Chinky' or 'flat-nosed'.

Integration, not assimilation

Perceived as westernised, amoral and available, Northeastern women become targets of sexual violence.

Yet on the placards at the recent protests by Northeasterners in Delhi, there are messages like, "We are not Outsiders" and "We are Indians too".

What they seem to be saying is that Northeasterners seek integration as equal citizens, which is not the same as assimilation.

They are willing to adapt to the 'majority nation', but they expect the latter to respect difference, accommodate their identities, and adapt to their ways - to their food habits and to their cultural mores: a demand for equal citizenship in cultural as well as in civic terms.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA
