Economic&PoliticalWEEKLY (/)

Subscribe (/subscribe.html) My Account (/user) Logout (/user/logout)
ISSN (Print) - 0012-9976 | ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

Nido Taniam and the Fraught Question of Racism in India

Thangkhanlal Ngaihte (thangkhanlal@gmail.com (mailto:thangkhanlal@gmail.com)) is an independent researcher based in New Delhi.

Racial prejudice against people from the north-east is most acutely felt at the institutional level where their Indianness is also questioned. Racism cannot be addressed unless the police force is reformed and sensitised.

The death of Nido Taniam, a 19-year old young man from Arunachal Pradesh, in Delhi on 29 January 2014 after a racially-inspired assault has brought the issue of racism into the spotlight. Historically, India has always taken a holier than thou position on the issue of racism and has positioned itself as a victim (of British colonial racism, for example). We love to recall our tolerant and accommodative cultural heritage and how we had firmly and consistently opposed the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Earlier discourses on racism in India were mainly framed around caste-based discrimination.[1]

However, the experience of racism by the north-east[2] people of Mongoloid racial stock in mainland India is of a different order and much more in-your-face, because of observed ethnic/racial appearance in the form of different skin colour and looks, language, cultural barriers and alien-sounding, difficult-to-pronounce names. Secondly, dalits have been subjected to all imaginable discrimination earlier, but their Indianness has never been questioned. The north-easterners, as their slogans during the recent protests show, have to actually beg to be accepted as Indians. Nido's death and all that followed have reopened, in this way, "the delicate question of the place of the North-east in India's imagination" (Mehta 2014).

It is difficult to know the exact number of people from the north-east residing in Delhi. A survey by the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, last year put the number of youth from the region in Delhi alone at 2,00,000. The same survey also estimated that 4,14,850 people migrated from the north-eastern states into various metro cities in India during 2005-10 (Hanghal 2014). The recent spate in in-migration to the metros is partly due to the "neoliberal transformation of urban India (which) has created new consumer and investment spaces" though other factors are also evidently at play (McDuie-Ra 2012: 40). Business process outsourcing (BPO) and other private sector businesses, which put a premium on proficiency of the English language, suits people of the north-east, most of whom are products of relatively better, English-medium private high schools.

Three Levels of Racism

- 1949-1965 (/journal/ew-archive)

Sections

- Home (/)
- Editorials (/editorials)
  - Translations (/translation)
- Commentary (/commentary)
- Book Reviews (/book-reviews)
- Perspectives (/perspectives)
- Special Articles (/special-articles)
- Special (/specials)
  - Review Issues (http://www.epw.in/content/review-issues)
  - Special Issues (http://www.epw.in/content/special-issues)
- Engage (/engage)
- Web Exclusives (/web-exclusives)
  - Reports From the States (/reports-states)
  - Glimpses from the Past (/glimpses-past)
- Postscript (/postscript)
- Notes (/notes)
- Discussions (/discussion)
- Columns (/columns)
- Insight (/insight)
- Letters (/letters)
- Current Statistics (/current-statistics)
- EPW Index (From 1964) (/epw-index.html)

In a recent article, Lawrence Liang and Golan Naulak made a distinction between two levels of racism, viz, "footnote racism" and "frontpage racism" (Liang and Naulak 2014). However, these two terms are not enough to encapsulate the racism experienced by north-easterners. The distinctiveness of racial prejudice and discrimination against the north-east people in mainland India is that the experience is not confined to the two levels of racism mentioned above, but is actually felt most acutely at the third level, which may be called institutional racism.

"Footnote racism" implies racial prejudices experienced in subtle forms in everyday life. This type of racism happens at everyday interactions with random people in the streets, at neighbourhood markets, alleyways and other interactions with essential utility providers. It comes in the form of snide remarks, unwelcome staring, smirks and lazy stereotyping about clothing and sexuality. Most of the time, this type of racism is more felt than directly experienced, but is no less unsettling. Ignorance about the history, mores and values of the north-easterners and deeply internalised ideas about homogenised "Indianness" are responsible for this form of racism.

"Headline racism" refers to overt physical, racist hate attacks which occupy newspaper headlines and hence the characterisation. Racist attacks are usually perpetrated by miscreants individually or in groups, who may have been emboldened by the deeply hostile attitude of the locals against these foreign-looking people. In this way, pervasive footnote racism in the society creates conducive environment for headline racism to be carried out. This is no longer about attitudes or prejudices, but outward violence or a hate crime leading to murder, as in the case of Nido Taniam. These types of physical attacks require the intervention of law-enforcing agencies and that is where institutional racism plays out.

Institutional racism is experienced when victims of racially-inspired attacks seek remedy through law. This is where the police come in. The racist prejudice is experienced here in the form of attempts by the police to suppress or make light of the true nature of the crime. There is a tendency to cast aspersions on the character of the victims or complainants and refuse to register first information reports, or of putting unnecessary pressure on the victims to withdraw the case.These are all lived experiences of north-easterners in Delhi, and elsewhere. It was shocking to read that the police told reporters, regarding the racially-inspired assault on Ginkhansuan Naulak and his cousin at Madangir in Delhi on 9 February 2014, that "the two (victims) alleged that around 8.30 p.m. they were consuming liquor near a shop when the other group reached there. Soon an argument broke out between them over some issue". The police further claimed that the laceration on Ginkhansuan's ear which required stitches was caused by slapping (*The Hindu* Staff Reporter 2013). This was a lie, concocted not by the perpetrators of the attack, but by the police who should have supported the victims.

When a young girl from Manipur was found dead under suspicious circumstances at Chirag Delhi, a south Delhi locality in May 2013, the concerned police station immediately registered a case of suicide (*The Hindu* Staff Reporter 2013). Only after much pressure did the police modify the FIR to include Sections 302 (murder) and 304 (culpable homicide) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Madhu Chandra, who established the North East Support Centre in Delhi, was quoted as saying that in cases concerning the north-easterners, the police typically act only after pressure from the media or politicians (Hanghal 2014). The prejudice is, of course, not confined to Delhi. Last year, the Goa police delayed the registration of complaint of molestation by two women from Singapore because they thought the women were from the north-east (Bhatia 2014). Institutional racism is also experienced at the hands of hospital authorities, and in the lower courts in subtler forms.

Most people have, through their own localised socialisation process, internalised some levels of prejudice against people not like them. The problem assumes an altogether different dimension when the institutions of law-governed societies themselves become a site of racism. One needs to seriously worry when institutions like the police, which are supposed to be neutral and fair to every one, can no longer be trusted to enforce the law in a fair and just manner.

Because of this special nature of racism which is experienced at every stage from the initial prejudices and attacks to the police and hospital authorities, there is often no choice for the victims and their supporters but to mobilise and pressurise the authorities at every stage to come to a semblance of justice. People have to come and agitate in front of police stations, hospitals and courts. That is what the people of the north-east in Delhi are trying to do. However, this kind of perpetual mobilisation is unsustainable – most have to earn a living or study.

Police Reforms Crucial

In the wake of recent attacks, various suggestions have been put forth to tackle this deep-seated problem (Mehta 2014; Hazarika 2014; Hauzel 2014; Majumdar 2014). Improvement and restructuring of school textbooks and syllabus to incorporate the neglected histories, social systems and cultures of the north-east people is one such suggestion. Another is to take measures which increase the visibility and presence of north-eastern people in cinema, television, films, theatres and the media. There is a strong demand for the enactment of an anti-racism law. A committee has been set up to study the problem and make suggestions.

These measures are necessary to instil a spirit of mutual tolerance and acceptance of diversity amongst the people. The trend of urbanisation in the country will require less insularity and more cultural exchange and we will survive only by inculcating the spirit of live and let live. But, these are long-term measures. Think for a minute about incorporating north-east in our textbooks. Given that the region has been a site of contesting historical narratives, inter-community rivalry and conflict, and mutually incompatible political demands and aspirations, the task will not be as easy as it sounds. It is notable that the Nagas' political struggle has been there, for example, in some detail in the Indira Gandhi National Open University textbooks.

Moreover, social prejudices die hard and law is ill-suited to address social and cultural malaises. As the Nazi theoretician Carl Schmitt memorably said in a different context, the law by itself does not govern (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2013). Even if stringent laws are enacted, they will have to be enforced through the police. As we know, all the recent protests are as much against police apathy as they are about racial prejudice at the mass level.

Therefore, the one core issue that demands immediate attention is police reforms. Ad hoc measures like setting up of special helpline phone numbers or special north-east cells within the police force are insufficient. Prejudices, myths and stereotypes about north-easterners run deep within the police force. Much of this is due to sheer ignorance about each other. To start with, the government must immediately undertake special recruitment drives for north-east youth in the Delhi Police. According to a recent news report, there are only 43 north-easterners in the Delhi Police out of the total personnel strength of 90,000 (Mathur 2014). It is interesting that while there are now visible numbers of north-easterners working in all government departments in Delhi, as well as in hospitals and private companies, they are simply invisible in the police force.

The police are vital because they are the main interface between the citizens and the state. They embody state power in the cities, much in the same way the army embodies state power in the north-east. Imagine, for example, that at least 10% of the Delhi Police personnel are from the north-east. The sight of many "chinky" faces in the police force will engender acceptance in the mind of the mainlanders that these people are also Indians serving India. For the north-easterners themselves, the sight of their own kind in the force will give them a sense of belonging and inculcate confidence in the force itself. Other measures, aimed at the general masses, can follow.

Defining India

The question of Indianness has always been a fraught question in India's history and was also an issue for India's founding fathers. Two contrasting strands dominate. The first, championed by people like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, sought to trace Indianness from the Vedic past, Aryan in race, Sanskritic in culture and language and Hindu in religion. In this conception, the north-east was excluded, territorially, culturally, racially (Savarkar 2005). This idea of Indianness was rejected by independent India, but it still dominates our cultural imaginings of this nation.

The second, which was adopted by independent India and championed most famously by Jawaharlal Nehru, visualised an Indianness which is open-ended and not culturally closed or static. In Sunil Khilnani's telling, India appeared to Nehru as

> a space of ceaseless cultural mixing, its history a celebration of the soiling effects of cultural miscegenation and accretion, 'an ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously' (Khilnani 2004: 169).

This conception of Indianness did not attempt to reassure itself by relying on a settled image of the culture, nor did it try to impose one. What it did was envisage a common purpose in the quest of economic development. Its most important trait was simply that it did not monopolise or simplify the definition of

Indianness. Nehru, even in his own time, had the insight that, India being what it is, it is this extemporised and secular conception of nationhood that can keep this nation together. At the same time, Nehru was aware of Indians' deeply religious and conservative nature. That is why he had believed that this conception of Indianness can be constructed and sustained only with the power of the secular state and its secular institutions, like the police.

Notes

1 The question of whether caste-based discriminations are a form of racism is still a raging debate. For an overview of this debate, see Kaur (2001).

2 I use the term, "north-east", here to refer to all people of Mongoloid racial stock, inhabiting the hill regions of the eight north-eastern states of India. By "mainland India", I mean the rest of India outside these eight states.

References

Bhatia, Gautam (2014): "The Great Indian Racist", *The Hindu*, 13 February, available at http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-great-indian-racist/article568... (http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-great-indian-racist/article5681976.ece), accessed on 28 February 2014.

Hanghal, Ninglun (2014): "Northeastern Youth Protests in Delhi: Opportunity to Bridge the Gap", *Business Standard*, 14 February, available at http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/northeastern-youth-pr... (http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/northeastern-youth-protests-in-delhi-opportunity-to-bridge-the-gap-comment-special-to-ians-114021400391_1.html), accessed on 15 February 2014.

Hauzel, Hoihnu (2014): "Progressive North Eastern Thinking, Mistaken as Lack of Morals by Outsiders", *Hindustan Times*, 7 February, available at http://www.hindustantimes.com/comment/ (http://www.hindustantimes.com/comment/) analysis/progressive-north-eastern-thinking-mistaken-as-lack-of-morals-by-outsiders/article1-1181355.aspx, accessed on 28 February 2014.

Hazarika, Sanjoy (2014): "Us and the Northeast", *The Indian Express*, 7 February, available at http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/us-and-the-northeast/ (http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/us-and-the-northeast/), accessed on 28 February 2014.

The Hindu Staff Reporter (2013): "Death of Manipuri Women in Delhi Still a Mystery", *The Hindu*, 3 July, available at http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/death-of-manipuri-woman-in-del... (http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/death-of-manipuri-woman-in-delhi-still-a-mystery/article4777395.ece), accessed on 28 February 2014.

– (2014): "Two Manipuri Youth Attacked in South Delhi", *The Hindu*, 11 February, available at http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/two-manipuri-youth-attacked-in... (http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/two-manipuri-youth-attacked-in-south-delhi/article5676217.ece), accessed on 15 February 2014.

Kaur, Naunidhi (2001): "Caste and Race", *Frontline*, Vol 18 (13), 6 July, available at http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl1813/18130950.htm (http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl1813/18130950.htm), accessed on 17 February 2014.

Khilnani, Sunil (2004, first published 1997): *The Idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin),

Liang, Lawrence and Golan Naulak (2014): "Cultural Ignorance and Prejudice", *The Hindu*, 4 February, available at http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/cultural-ignorance-and-p... (http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/cultural-ignorance-and-prejudice/article5650955.ece), accessed on 28 February 2014.

Majumdar, Ushinor (2014): "The Ugly Skin We Live In", *Tehelka Magazine*, Vol 11 (7), 15 February, available at http://www.tehelka.com/the-ugly-skin-we-live-in/ (http://www.tehelka.com/the-ugly-skin-we-live-in/), accessed on 28 February 2014.

Mathur, Aneesha (2014): "Recruit More Police Personnel from Northeast States: HC Tells Delhi", *The Indian Express* (Delhi Newsline), 11 February, available at http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/recruit-more-police-person... (http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/recruit-more-police-personnel-from-northeast-states-hc-tells-delhi/), accessed on 15 February 2014).

McDuie-Ra, Duncan (2012): "Cosmopolitan Tribals: Frontier Migrants in Delhi", *South Asia Research*, Vol 2 (1), pp 39-55.

Mehta, Pratap Bhanu (2014): "India after Nido", *The Indian Express*, 6 February, available at http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-after-nido/ (http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-after-nido/), accessed on 28 February 2014.

Savarkar, V D (2005, first published 1923): *Hindutva: Essentials of Hindutva*, Hindi Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2013): "Carl Schmitt", available at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/ (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/), accessed on 28 February 2014.

Comments (-) Hide

EPW looks forward to your comments. Please note that comments are moderated as per our comments policy. They may take some time to appear. A comment, if suitable, may be selected for publication in the Letters pages of EPW.

About Engage (/about-epw-engage)
The Team (/the-team.html)
Contact Us (/contact-us.html)
For Contributors (/notes-contributors.html)

Term & Policy

Terms and Conditions (https://www.epw.in/terms-conditions.html)
Copyright (https://www.epw.in/copyright.html)
Privacy Policy (https://www.epw.in/privacy.html)
Style Sheet (https://www.epw.in/style-sheet.html)

Circulation

Refund and Cancellation (https://www.epw.in/refund.html)
User Registration (https://www.epw.in/user-registration.html)
Delivery Policy (https://www.epw.in/delivery-policy.html)

Advertisement

Why Advertise in EPW? (https://www.epw.in/why-advertise.html)
Advertisement Tariffs (https://www.epw.in/tariffs.html)
Announcements / Appointments (PDF) (https://www.epw.in/node/152720)

Connect with us

320-322, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai, India 400 013
Phone: +91-22-40638282 | Fax: +91-22-24934515 | Email: Editorial - edit@epw.in (mailto:edit@epw.in) | Subscription - circulation@epw.in (mailto:circulation@epw.in) | Advertisement - advertisement@epw.in (mailto:advertisement@epw.in)
Designed, developed and maintained by Yodasoft Technologies Pvt. Ltd. (https://www.yodasoft.com/)