

GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS AND RACISM AMONG NORTHEASTERNS IN INDIAN CITIES

Korsi Dorene Kharshiing

Marginalization, intolerance, stereotyping, and discrimination faced by people from North-East India or Northeasterners in metropolitan cities of India points to the distinctive facet of race as crucial to their perception as "outsiders". Their subjection to a singular category based on their racial differences by their mainstream fellow Indians resulted in racism. Discourses reflect the interplay of their experiences of racism and their resultant consciousness and action as a group. This paper employs critical discourse analysis of two media texts to illustrate, and capture lived experiences of racism by Northeasterners. Interestingly, the misperception of a pan-North-East identity culminates in their lumping as a homogenous racial entity. Furthermore, the article examines theories of group consciousness to shed light on their mobilization and collective action.

Key words: North-East - Northeasterner - Racism - Group consciousness - Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

In India, predetermined features, or characteristics such as race, caste, gender, religion, region etc., influence how diverse social groups are perceived thereby leading to encounters and experiences of marginalization, intolerance, stereotyping, and discrimination. Because of its diversity in terms of people, and regions, a coherent Indian national society and even identity is not easily identifiable. The North-East of India as a region comprises eight federal states: Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. This region is joined to the country by a narrow strip of land that reinforces the perception of its physical distance from the "mainland" of India. Ethnically, a majority of the North-East people or northeasterners are historically said to be of Mon-Khmer, Tai and Tibeto-Burman origins that starkly differentiates them physically from their Indian counterparts in the rest of the country. Furthermore, this region was rife with insurgency and armed struggle seeking for autonomy from the Indian state. The depiction of the region as "troubled" is evident in media discourses; the portrayal of its peoples and lands as exotic contributed to this schism in perception and experiences between northeasterners and the citizenry from other parts of India. Dearth of employment and educational opportunities due to insurgency, lack of investment and infrastructure, corruption, etc., propelled many northeasterners to migrate to the metropolitan cities like Delhi in search of jobs and better education (McDuie-Ra, 2012; Sohi & Singh, 2016). Moreover, McDuie-Ra (2012) observes that most migrants from this region come to cities like Delhi for education

* Korsi Dorene Kharshiing, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025. E-mail: korsidk@gmail.com.

and because of easy availability of work particularly in the retail, hospitality, and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors making them more visible and audible. The boon of the English language being the lingua franca of northeasterners, afforded them better employment opportunities in these sectors (McDuie-Ra, 2012). This researcher also points to the experience of racism faced by northeasterners in cities like Delhi. Sohi and Singh (2016) also reveal that people from this region of the country are targets of stereotyping, intolerance, and physical and verbal discrimination. McDuie-Ra (2012) reiterated that discrimination experiences of migrant people from NE India differ from migrants belonging to other minorities due to their perception of being racially different evident in their physical attributes and distinct lifestyle.

The *media* has been instrumental in highlighting incidences of racism, discrimination and even violence of northeasterners. The deaths of Nido Tania, a student from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi in January 2014, and of Loitam Richard from Manipur in Bangalore in April 2012 gained national attention through media intervention which dubbed the ghastly incidents as “racial crimes”. The coverage of protests and events by both the electronic and print media surrounding the death of Nido Tania in January 2014 reveal that northeasterners were anguished, angry and ignited to rally for their rights as citizens of India who articulated their sense of being marginalised, vulnerable and discriminated in their workplaces, social spaces and even in their dealings with the state machinery such as the police. Scholars and commentators of this region acknowledge that North-East India is not homogenous with diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political aspects countering that its diversity is too distinct a marker for it to be a collective entity. Ngaihte (2013) argues that the emergence of a “pan-North-East” identity is legitimate since commonalities, shared experiences and diversities make up the realities of people of this region living in cities. This generalization and clubbing together of northeasterners into one entity; the resulting harassment, discrimination and violence emanating from this generalization led to the emergence of shared realities and a *collective consciousness as a group*.

Group Consciousness

Group consciousness is a multidimensional concept developed when members of a group recognize their status as being part of a deprived group (Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981). It is this sense of commonality and shared circumstances that encourages groups to become involved politically, partially explaining relatively high rates of political participation among disadvantaged groups (Olsen, 1970; Verba & Nie, 1972). Literature has revealed that linkages between group consciousness and political participation developed over time (Gurin, Miller & Gurin, 1980; Miller et al., 1981; Olsen, 1970; Verba & Nie, 1972). For example, Furthermore, Stokes (2003) finds that group consciousness increases Latino political participation. Predominant group consciousness theories such as *stratum consciousness* (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980), *relative deprivation* (Crosby, 1976), and *nigrescence* (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995) represent social psychological theories of collective action. All of these theories posit that group

consciousness leads to a collective action and political activism. Moreover, group consciousness grows out of unique experiences to which only members of the particular social group can be exposed (Lau, 1983). Turner and Reynolds (2001) elaborate that such experiences provide a distinctive basis for contrast with out-groups that is necessary for the psychological formation of the group. Vis-a-vis Northeasterners, the emergence of a “pan-North- East” identity results since commonalities, shared experiences and diversities make up the realities of people of this region living in cities (Ngaihte, 2013).

The *objective* of the study is to examine the experiences of racism of Northeasterners living in cities in India that are portrayed in newspaper texts. Furthermore, the emergence of group consciousness due to the shared realities of the community is also looked at in the texts.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Rooted in critical linguistics of the 1970's, and influenced by theorists such as Foucault, Gramsci, and Habermas, amongst others, CDA's focus is on language. The noteworthiness of CDA as an approach to analysis is that it takes a socio-political stance to texts, arguing that in being engaged and committed it serves to intervene in social practice and relationships. More specifically, this framework reiterates that power and ideologies are involved in discourse that necessitates a closer examination of the underlying relationships between discursive practices, events and texts. In this article, I predominantly employed Fairclough's method of critical discourse analysis. This perspective reiterates that social and cultural structures, relations and processes are embedded in texts, thus warranting their analyses. Fairclough (1992) articulates the importance of written or spoken language along with visual images in texts. This perspective reiterates that social and cultural structures, relations, and processes are embedded in texts, thus warranting their analyses. What makes this outlook laudable is its emphasis on the issues of power relations, power struggles, dominance as played out in texts, thus, revealing the close connect that discourse has with society. Discourses have contexts, particularly, the social and historical. Since discourse is linked to contexts, therefore interpretations are varied and context specific. Vocabulary, semantics, grammar, topicality, ambiguity, and other intricacies in text are analysed.

Why News as Texts?

Media discourse through articles published in newspapers not only distribute, but also build, influence and sway public knowledge in terms of the content disseminated. News reporting largely shapes public knowledge about the world, and especially events in the world in which people have no personal connection with (Van Dijk, 1991). News content by virtue of linguistic expression also make up and reflect social reality. What is noteworthy is that language is instrumental to meaning making of news discourses by both the authors scripting the news texts, and the readers and

consumers. Hence, in the present paper, the discourses examined are articles or texts published in English local and national newspapers that delved on the Khasi ethnic group.

Corpus for Study

Discourses in the media reflect the attempts to report and opine on experiences of stereotypes, harassment, discrimination and even violence faced by northeasterners in Indian metropolitan cities. The study utilizes two media texts comprising reporting, editorial and feature articles from *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* that were published in 2015 and 2016 on Northeasteners in Indian cities. I focused on *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* since these are national newspapers with wide national readership and circulation. These articles were retrieved and accessed from the web archives of the said newspapers and were then subjected to a critical discourse analysis. The aim of analyzing the sample of articles in the above-mentioned newspapers was to enable me to examine the representation of Northeasteners in the texts that would be insightful in understanding their encounters with racism and the resultant group consciousness thereby.

Analysis and Discussion

Headlines and Leads

Media discourses through newspapers, magazines and blogs as social practice are processed and interpreted by readers as consumers. Thus, headlines and accompanying leads are crucial in the organisation and structuring of news texts as they enable readers to grasp and interpret the gist of the story or issue. An analysis of the texts under study is represented below.

Table 1: Analysis of Headlines and Leads of News Texts

S. No.	Source	Date	*Headlines/ Leads
1.	<i>The Times of India</i>	May 4, 2016	No city for northeasterners? <i>Women from the region increasingly face sexual harassment with two cases reported last week alone.</i>
2.	<i>The Hindu</i>	December 19, 2015	Winds from the Northeast <i>Whether it's sport, music or literature, Northeasteners are making a mark on the mainland. Is this the beginning of their mainstreaming? A lot more, however, needs to be done to integrate them and make them feel safe, wherever they choose to live.</i>

Note: * Headlines are represented in bold. Leads that accompany the headlines are in italics.

A glance at table-1 above indicates that the *headlines* and their accompanying *leads* if any, point to the racism felt by Northeasteners in Indian cities. Further, the *lexical choices* portray the association of racism, victimization, prejudice, harassment, discrimination, exclusion, and non-citizenship status of people from the North-East.

The headline ‘No city for northeasterners?’ (*The Times of India*, April 17, 2015) betrays the *outsider position of Northeasterners in Indian cities where they lack the accommodating space to reside and live as equal citizens in the country*. A sense of disengagement felt by people from this region of the country is projected. The accompanying *lead* stresses the frequency of sexual harassment faced by women from this region.

The need to mainstream and integrate those from the North-East is reflected in the headline ‘Winds from the Northeast’ (*The Hindu*, December 19, 2015). This headline itself screams of the peripheral and almost voiceless status afforded to those belonging to North-East India in cities. What is noteworthy is that the lead to this article explicitly acknowledge the isolation and peripheral position that northeasterners occupy vis-à-vis the rest of the country or mainland India. Moreover, the bridge to integration of this region from that the mainland is through their inclusion in diverse fields of sports, music, and literature; their safety is emphasized to instill their sense of belongingness in living in Indian cities of their choice. *The Hindu* leads the article by prodding readers to examine their own racial attitudes towards Northeasterners before crying hoarse of being victimized due to racism in the West. Perhaps this article in its lead serves as a reality check for Indians in the mainland.

Thus, the presentation of news via headlines and leads has a bearing on how readers make meaning and interprets information. This in turn, not only informs but also builds and shapes readers’ perceptions and ideologies of the treatment and hardships of people from the northeast in cities in India.

Categorization through generalizations and stereotypes

CDA takes a critical stance to text that is interrogative in nature with its focus on social wrongs (Fairclough, 2003). My analysis of these texts also delves into representations of dominance, control and power that perpetuate social wrongs. Stereotypes play a crucial role in fuelling the otherisation of ‘others’ as it fits people into categories that then guide behaviours and discourse in social interactions learnt within their groups (Bar-Tal, 1997). *Generalizations* that pertain to the extension of characteristics or activities of a specific group to a much wider open set of people are linked to stereotypes and prejudice (van Dijk, 1986).

Table 2: Generalizations pertaining to Northeasterners in news texts.

S. No	Source with date of publication	Reference to Northeasterners
1.	<i>The Times of India</i> (May 4, 2016)	- ‘Chinki’ - ‘Chilli Chicken’ - outcasts
2.	<i>The Hindu</i> (December 19, 2015)	- ‘Japani’

Stereotyping through generalizations made enable those that do so to simplify and lump people together, ignoring their uniqueness and individuality that eventually lead to prejudice and discrimination (Fiske & Taylor, 1993). From table-2, *categorization* of Northeasterners is made through generalization. For example, labels

of offensive and derogatory terms such as 'chinki' or 'chilli chicken' (*The Times of India*, May 4, 2016) smacks of lumping people of the North-East based on their physical attributes and their preferred food tastes treating them as non-citizens of the state. Similarly, the term 'Japani' (*The Hindu*, December 19, 2015) points to the perception of Northeasterners as foreigners and outsiders. *Categorization, resulting from generalization and stereotyping*, lead to the lumping together of diverse ethnic groups in the North-East that are diverse in culture, language, customs, etc., except for the shared commonality of belonging to this region in the country. Such categorizations propel Northeasterners to rally collectively as a group made conscious that their rights as citizens need to be upheld.

Relationship between participants in study

Crucial a critical analysis in CDA, I also examined *negative connotations in words and phrases* as choice of wording in a text depends on and helps creates social relationships between participants (Fairclough, 1999).

Table 3: Vocabulary with negative connotations in news texts.

S. No	Source with date of publication	Vocabulary with negative connotations		
1.	<i>The Times of India</i> (May 4, 2016)	- offensive	-derogatory	-assault
		-'Chinki'	-'Chilli chicken'	-racial discrimination
		-sexual harassment	-bashed up	-racially abused
		-argument over fare		-brazenly abducted
		-arrest	-vulnerable to exploitation	
		-molestation	-recent kidnap	-impartial investigation
		-attacks	-racially abused	-assaulted
		-blame	-scared	-discrimination
		-alienating	-police are not very friendly	
		-eve-teased and followed		-outcasts
		-cops laughed it off		
2.	<i>The Hindu</i> (December 19, 2015)	-Don't look Indian	-'Japani'	-Race based crimes
		-unhealed wounds	-corrupt local governments	
		-destroyed the possibility of employment		
		-visible and audible othering of people from the Northeast		
		-painful reality		-sad fact
		-racist attacks	-rejected	
		-resistance to including Northeast writing		-token presence
		-salary expectations are lower		-work late

-irregular hours	-paid less	-end up paying more
-don't understand the language		-made to fear
-how do we get employers to treat Northeasterners fairly?		
-How can we make cities safer for Northeasterners?		
-stereotypes	-dismiss	-human problem

All the above-mentioned words in all the texts enumerated in Table-3 with *negative connotations and implications* suggest the distant and discordant relationship between citizens from the northeast and their counterparts from the rest of the country. The lexical choices expressed by the authors in the text hints at the realities of Northeastern people living in the cities. For instance, *The Times of India* (May 4, 2016) reports that besides being referred to by “*offensive and derogatory terms*” such as “*Chinki*” and “*Chilli chicken*” that “*people from the northeastern community claim to hear regularly even in a cosmopolitan city like namma Bengaluru*”, “*women of the community are being increasingly subjected to assault and sexual harassment*”. This plight of the community reveals the second-class citizenry status that Northeasterners occupy in Indian cities such as Bengaluru compounded by the “*police that are not friendly*” in the redressal of their grievances.

The socio-cultural and historical context of the region vis-à-vis the country was touched on in all the texts that argue for why the othering of people from the North-East takes place in India. The writer in *The Hindu* (December 19, 2015) expresses that a “*standard question from any person I am introduced to*” is “*Where are you from?*” and if the response meted is that she is an Indian from “*Northeast India*”, she is met with another query “*But you don't look Indian*”. The writer in this article opines that “*the visible and audible othering of people from the Northeast is a painful reality compounded by sad fact; it continues the outsider-insider perception*”. However, she also contends that the “*slow mainstreaming of the Northeast has been evident for some years now*” evident in the “*number of eateries that have mushroomed in Delhi serving cheap, healthy, uncompromisingly Northeastern cuisine*”. Moreover, literature from the region is also included in Indian universities, though “*it is just a token presence*”. Furthermore, the writer is optimistic of bringing the “*Northeast closer to the rest of India*” through “*regular festivals of food, literature, music and dance*” thereby disseminating “*sound information on the region*”. The urgent need for a fair and inclusive treatment of Northeasterners working and studying in cities is “*changing stereotypes*” through an “*in-depth understanding of the cultural practices and customs of the Northeast people*” in “*existing power structures such as educational institutions, mass media and workplaces*” and “*percolate this within their structures*”.

Group consciousness resulting in political activism among Northeasterners in cities such as Delhi is evident in their “*demanding of the inclusion of the history and cultural heritage of the Northeast in the national curriculum, creation of special Northeast Commissions in every state and a speedy trial of the Nido Taniam case*”

(Following such protests, The Bezbaruah Committee was instituted by the Government of India in February 2014 to listen to the issues raised by people from Northeast India living in other areas of the country, especially metro cities and to suggest measures for implementation by the state. The Committee submitted its report in July 2014.

Moreover, the community acknowledges that their alienation and othering can be combated by inclusion of North-East "*literature in school and university syllabi*"; "*agencies in metropolises that guide them on good jobs and salaries*" and "*affordable rents*" (*The Hindu*, December 19, 2015).

Writer-Reader Relations

Media discourses act as agents of discursively informing and building on readers' knowledge through language as social practice (Fairclough, 2003). Hence, the representation of people and social relations depicted in texts are influenced by the ideologies and experiences of the writers. The *writer and reader relation*, key to CDA is instrumental when the former engages the latter in the interpretation of events embedded in texts through language that serves as reality. For example, the writer in *The Hindu* (December 19, 2015), reflects that she encounters questions and doubts about being Indian when people comment that "*you don't look Indian*". Moreover, she narrates that she "*finds it tolerable and even amusing*" when she was called "*Japani*" or Japanese in Madras (now called Chennai) by street urchins. However, she elaborates that unfortunately, racism is not merely name-calling, but evidence of "*race-based crimes against people from the Northeast*" that "*reopen unhealed wounds*". Thus, the *texturing of identities* that Fairclough stresses in texts is evident in the newspaper discourse on racism and group consciousness of Northeasterners in cities.

Conclusion

What clearly comes across in the paper is the instances of racism that people from the Northeast region of the country face. In addition, group consciousness among people from this community heightens the feeling of their being othered by non-Northeasterners. Otherisation is also understood in the context of perceptions of the region vis-à-vis the country that was echoed in all the texts. Evidently, the status of being second-class citizens that Northeasterners occupy in Indian cities also contributes to this perception of "being different" and thereby being "othered". It is crucial therefore, to address issues of marginalization, stereotypical representations that are flawed, tackle discrimination of the people from this region of the country. Efforts to sensitize people in cities particularly that despite differences in ethnicity, culture and even religion, Northeasterners are very much citizens of the nation and thereby ought to be afforded the same spaces and treatment as their counterparts from the rest of the country.

References

- Bar-Tal, D. (1997). Formation and change of ethnic and national stereotypes: An integrative model. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 21*, 491-523.
- Crosby, F. J. (1976). A model of egoistical relative deprivation. *Psychological Review, 83*, 85-113.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1971). The negro-to-black conversion experience: Toward a psychology of black liberation. *Black World, 20*, 13-27.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1991). *Shades of black: Diversity in African-American identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1995). The psychology of nigrescence: Revising the Cross model. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 93-122). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1999). Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Fiske, S.T., & Taylor, S.F. (1991). *Social cognition* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Gurin, P., Miller, A.H., & Gurin, G. (1980). Startum identification and consciousness. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 43*(1), 30-47.
- Lau, R. R. (1989). Individual and contextual influences on group identification. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 52*, 220-231.
- Looks can't be grounds for discrimination; most ignorant about N-E. (2014, February 6). *The Indian Express*. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/looks-cant-be-grounds-for-discrimination-most-ignorant-about-n-e/>
- McDuaie-Ra, D. (2012). Beyond the 'Exclusionary City': North-east migrants in neo-liberal Delhi. *Urban Studies, 50*(8), 1625-1640.
- Miller, A.H., Gurin, P., Gurin, G., & Malanchuk, O. (1981). Group consciousness and political participation. *American Journal of Political Science, 25* (3), pp. 494-511.
- Ngaihte, S.T. (2013). The reality of North-East as an entity. *Economic and Political Weekly, 48* (50), 13-15.
- No city for northeasterners (2016, May 4). *The Times of India*. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/no-city-for-northeasterners/articleshow/52108533.cms>
- Olsen, M. (1970). Social and political participation of blacks. *American Sociological Review, 35*, 682-96.
- Sohi, K.K., & Singh, P. (2016). Experiencing microaggression: Invisibility, distress and self-stereotyping among Northeasters in India. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01995>
- Stokes, A.K. (2003). Latino group consciousness and political participation. *American Politics Research, 31*(4), 361-378.
- Turner, J.C., & Reynolds, K.J. (2001). The social identity perspective in intergroup relations:

Theories, themes and controversies. In R.J. Brown & S. Gaertner (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology (vol 4): Intergroup processes* (pp. 133-152). Oxford: Blackwell. van Dijk, T.A. (1986). *Racism in the press*. London: Arnold.

Verba, S., & Norman, N. (1972). *Participation in America: Political democracy and social equality*. New York: Harper & Row.

Winds from the Northeast (2015, December 19). *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/easterine-kire-on-how-northeasterners-are-making-a-mark-on-the-mainland/article8004833.ece>



This document was created with the Win2PDF "print to PDF" printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>