

Everyday racism

Intentionally ‘presumptuous racism’ permeates the lives of North-easterners in metropolitan cities of India, which the new anti-racism bill also fails to take note of



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Incidents of racism against Indians from the North-east are not new, especially during the last two decades in mainland metropolitan cities of India. The opening of India's economy in 1991 and burgeoning neo-liberal markets provided opportunities to youths from the North-eastern region to migrate and work, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, in such cities. While there was a shrinking of entrepreneurial opportunities in the 1990s due to the deteriorating law and order situation in many states of the region, there was also an increase in the number of students seeking higher educa-

tion outside the North-east.

In late December last year, I went to an Airtel customer relationship centre at Munirka in South Delhi, the closest to my residence, as the network of one of my sim cards was cut-off and online communications with the service provider had not helped. At the customer relationship centre, I was asked, “*Kaha ka sim card hai?*” (Where is the sim card from). I responded that it was from Delhi. The customer relationship executive then asked whether the region of the sim card was the “North-east”. I was confused and asked him whether sim cards were issued based on districts in Delhi such as “North-east” Delhi

and “South-west” Delhi. The customer relationship executive reiterated whether the sim card was from the “North-east”. By that time, I had understood what he meant and told him again that it was from Delhi and before that, from Kolkata.

I was not comfortable with such presumptions – just because I look “Asian” or the so-called “mongoloid phenotype”, he should not have asked me repeatedly whether the sim card was from the North-east telecom circle despite being told in the first instance that the location was Delhi. I told him that they should not be presumptuous as it could hurt their customers’ feelings. The customer relationship executive denied being “presumptuous” and defended himself by saying that he needed to ask that question. What was wrong was that after clearly being told about the circle of the sim card, he was still asking, not once but twice, whether it belonged to the North-east. During the conversation, a “senior” customer executive came up and inappropriately commanded that I “either keep silent and sit down or find another Airtel customer relationship centre nearby”.

I am pretty sure that the treatment meted out to me was done with the assumption of the general customer relationship centre visits of North-easterners residing in Munirka. This experience informs me about the everyday treatment of the general population from the North-east by employees at the particular centre.

Munirka village is the primary base for many North-easterners who came to Delhi for work or higher studies due to the abundant availability of affordable rental accommodations in this South Delhi neighbourhood. It is close to Gurugram for those who work pink collar jobs and to Delhi University's south campus and other colleges in South Delhi. Many are not versed

in speaking Hindi or the accents are different from the Hindi-speaking belt. Not conversant with such accents and the ineloquent Hindi, many people from the North-east are made into objects of ridicule and disdain. The experience discussed here is just one instance of racism that North-easterners face every day in mainland metropolitan cities – whether it be in public transport, open air markets, sports facilities, public recreational sites, etc.

The identification of mongoloid phenotypes exclusively with people of the North-east is wrong. The newly created Union Territory of Ladakh in North India may have been largely unknown or unheard of but there is a substantial population of people of mongoloid phenotypes in the Ladakh region. To cater to their political needs, the Union government and the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir had agreed to grant autonomy to the region in 1993 and the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council was created in 1995 by an Act of Parliament. When there is a negative identification of North-east Indians as “Chinese” during the coronavirus pandemic and they are accused of “spreading” the virus, I realise that expecting ill-informed locals to understand the Ladakhi people is too much to ask for.

Overt acts of racism are highlighted and criminal cases are being registered against perpetrators, particularly in the last decade. In light of the death of Richard Loitam and Dana Sylvia Sangma in April 2012, and Nido Tania in January 2014 due to racial discrimination, a 12-member committee under the chairmanship of MP Bezbaruah was appointed on 5 February 2014 “to suggest measures to be taken by the Government to address these concerns”, and “to suggest remedies to address these concerns including legal aspect of the

issues”. A special cell for North-eastern states was created within Delhi Police after recommendations of the committee.

Unlike the new anti-rape bill, only after a delay of six years since the death of Tania was the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2019, introduced in the Rajya Sabha on 7 February 2020. It is yet to be passed. The bill seeks to introduce section 153C and 505A in the Indian Penal Code to make discrimination punishable “on grounds of religion, race, caste or community, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, place of birth, residence, language disability or tribe”.

The anti-racism bill deals mainly with overt acts of racism which are openly done and clearly identifiable. However, these two sections do not deal with the covert acts of racism, a type of discrimination which is difficult to observe but more hazardous and harder to eliminate. What I intentionally call “presumptuous racism” falls within covert acts that are hard to detect or not easily identifiable. Therefore, they are harder to penalise.

Airtel has been operating in the North-east for almost two decades now and is the choice of many in the region. Constant racism against people like us in mainland cities could provoke resentment leading to a boycott call, like the #BoycottJio campaign by supporters of the farmers’ protests. Airtel needs to undertake a serious sensitisation programme to retain their customers, particularly those who have subscribed to the telecom service provider for a long time. It would also help the long-drawn efforts of activists and law-enforcing agencies to reduce and curb incidents of discrimination in the country.

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