'Insurgency' There and 'Identity' Here: A Study of Northeast Indian Migrants in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Identity and belongingness intersect in various ways for many juxtapose to social spaces. Northeast India is the medley of different races sub-divided into various tribes, sub-tribes and clans having different cultures and believes. Having a qualitative difference of geographical proximity from rest of the country, the region is more or less same having much in colonial heritage, religion, values, norms, culture, food habits and at some extends appearance, giving them a singular identity as 'Northeastern'. Knitted together total seven states (Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland) along with Sikkim is particularly dominated by the tribes from the descent of Mon-Khmer, Tai and Tibeto-Burman. The region faces tensions within the states, the central government as well as their native tribes, leading to political turmoil, multiple armed factions and stagnant social and economical institutions. There is every reason to believe that the region due to its geographical isolation and lack of government concern added with insurgency suffers social, infrastructural and economical development, leading its people to migrate. In recent years the prime example to be cited is Delhi which witnessed influx of 'Northeast' migrants, ethnically distinct from the city, has sparked racial tensions and regional differences. This is marked due to the structural differences in culture and colonial history which separates the Northeastern part of India from the rest of Indian sub-continent, giving them a more complex notion of, 'who they are and who they are not'. Their fragmented identities have raised the sense of Indian Diaspora giving insights of identity crisis in their own country questioning the idea of belongingness to the nation and citizenship.

Key Words: Insurgency, Identity, Diaspora, Citizenship, Migration, Belongingness

Introduction:

India is known throughout the world as the most diverse country having multi-culture and multi-ethnic society within itself. Although regions and people throughout India are constructed and viewed differently to each other, and these differences are pronounced and often articulated forcefully at the local level, they still fit into the larger nation, though rarely without difficulties, in ways that the Northeast India does not. The eight states comprising Northeast in itself vary in language, race, tribe, caste, religion and regional heritage. Most often it is clubbed together because not only territorially or culturally it is different from the rest of the country but also the people in the region are said to have Mongolian descent often mistaken by some to be foreigners. The frontier region due to its geographical inaccessibility and lack of government concern, faces an extensive disturbed socio-political and economic life, moreover the lack of infrastructural development and integration added to the isolation that prevent the region from the smooth transition, forcing to the people move out of the region to different parts of the country. Moreover there has always been a deadlock between the aspirations of the people of different ethnic groups and the response it received from the power elites at the centre.

The location of these 8 states is in itself part of the reason why it is the hotbed of militancy and trans-border ramifications leading the region to suffer the turmoil of insurgency and stagnant socio-politico system. There are many such insurgent organizations plagiarizing the region, namely National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), Naga National Council (NNC) and many more. The demands of these insurgent groups ranging from succession to autonomy and the right of self determination and a plethora of ethnic groups claiming for special rights and protection for their distinct identity and protection, the region is bound to be a turbulent one. To be politically incorrect, to some extend the demands for their protection of identity and distinctness is quite acceptable but the problem lies with their way of protest and claim for autonomous states. In concern to this many from the region who aspire to have a better and secured life away from these insecurities, chose to migrate from the region to the metropolitan cities of the country.

Due to the geographical isolation till now there is no intermingling with the people of the other parts which is why they have retained their original features, whereas the people in other parts of the country though originally from different tribes and races have mingled and formed what is now pictured as "Indian" look. India in itself contains diverse regions but the distance between the northeast and rest of India is qualitatively different constructing it in to a different region. . There is a strong belief in both the Indian "mainland" and in most of the Northeast itself that the different states, autonomous units, and people grouped together as "the Northeast" are not part of India in the same ways as other diverse groups of people (Simmons, 2015). The *'mainland'* here refers to the entire nation except the north east Himalayan belt which is seen collectively as north eastern region and frontiers for the former.

The frontier region suffers extensive lack of infrastructural development and integration added to the isolation that prevent the region from the smooth transition, leading to the people moving out of the region to different parts of the country. The prime example to be cited in this context is Delhi which in recent years has witnessed influx of 'North-east' migrants in the city. An influx of migrants from India's ethnically distinct region has sparked racial tensions and regional differences in the former city. The cultural difference of the North Eastern Region (NER) and the Indian mainland is not a secret; both are to be equally blamed for its failure to integrate. There is a saying that 'the beauty of the world lies in the diversity of its people. The question is not simply why it is so but actually it states the stereotyping the region and the way we look at those people who enter the 'mainland' with the tag of 'migrants' and 'outsiders'. The reason may be politically induced regionalism but our main concern is to see how these people are forced to leave their homeland due to insurgency 'there' and when they find an escape to this ordeal their identity becomes a question for the entire nation. Interestingly this paper highlights potentially existing insurgency and related problems in the hill paradise of India and discuses the contested identities of Northeast and understanding the region beyond the stereotypes in the metropolitan spaces of Delhi. The people from northeast face high level racism and are identified as 'outsiders' by the people of the same country, they belong to; they never have failed since they migrated to the city to create their own space, claiming it as the enclave of their identity concentrated with their culture

which the people from 'mainland' call 'northeastern'. The paper attempts to put forward the grievances faced by the people from a small part of the country which in itself is a medley of different races divided into numerous tribes, sub-tribes and clans having different cultures and believes, stands to face problems both inside and outside their region. On a whole my attempt in this paper is to understand the characteristic of migration from NER, which is quite unique mainly due to the backwardness of resources somewhere because of insurgency and government failure in the region and their struggle to overcome identity crisis in the city.

Dynamics of Seven States: Rise of Insurgency & Politics

The Northeastern states of India has been plagued by insurgency led violence and conflicts for many decades. The greater threat and concern have been, however, the rising regional tensions juxtapose to the series of insurgency crack-down policies by successive central and state governments since the 1950s. Historically the colonial rulers took nearly a century to annex the entire region, and administered the hills as a loose 'frontier area', with the result, that large parts of the northeastern hill areas never came in touch with the principle of a central administration before (H. B. Stiftung, 2009). It has come to be identified with lesser development as compared to the centre (Mrinal Suman, 2011). The territories of North East have been demarcated by the superimposed boundary which is the amalgamation of traditional ethnic boundary and territorial boundary. Unfortunately after independence while demarcating the state boundaries the concern of traditional ethnic boundaries was blatantly ignored, this left the region till now a hotbed of traditional politics. To understand the problem of insurgency in Northeast India it would be necessary to first know its genesis and analyze the narrative of each rebel group.

The broad racial differences between India and its Northeast and the tenuous geographical link (the chicken neck Siliguri Corridor) contributed to a sense of alienation, a feeling of *'otherness'* that subsequently gave rise to a political culture of violent separatism. Further, Northeast India is home to more than 50 ethnic rebel groups – a few demanding complete secession from India, others fighting for ethnic identities and homelands and some running the insurgency

as an industry to spin easy money without any political ideology (Center for North-East Studies and Policy Research, 2010).

The anthropologist as well as the social scientist fined the study of urban dynamics and ethnicity very thought provoking. The attempts of transforming Indian city at global platform have affected it both at federal and local level. No matter how barren the land is, no territory is worthless if it's a homeland. The attachment of these ethnic minorities with their land holds a different equation. Homeland of a person is precise of certain fundamental of culture and identity which attributes to ones individuality. After independence, many such territorial entities were lumped together to form different administrative and political units without taking in consideration the fact that all these territorial units were a hub of different ethnic groups having completely different cultural and traditional entities. The logic behind the reorganization of administrative boundaries somehow over ridded the traditional concept of these ethnic minorities which led to intensified regional conflict. The dichotomy between the traditional boundaries (ethnic) and administrative boundaries remains the central part of the contemporary conflict in the region, with each ethnic community seeking to construct socio-political identity within the circumference of the ethnic setting.

Migration: As an 'outsider' or 'insider

"Once you step out of the northeast, you have to renegotiate the question of being an Indian and your citizenship comes at stake, as physically the northeast is a part of India but culturally it isn't". Delhi as a capital city is a socio battlefield where different forces meet making it a mosaic city and confront each other, as one interested in its own prevalence of hegemony and looking for their identity in the city. "The identity of an Indian man [or woman] is culturally defined and anyone who doesn't fit that mold is an outsider," says Pradip Phanjoubam, a fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. And although there are many communities in India that are labeled as 'Other', it is only north-easterners who have their origin questioned at every turn due to a physical appearance that is then linked to or associated with other negative traits such as 'living in isolation and refusing to mix with other communities in Delhi' or being 'loose and immoral'. Northeast migrants are seen as racially different from the Indian mainstream'. The city has its own diversity

of culture with people from the mainland and the frontiers, navigating the spaces struggling with their identity.

National Capital Region (NCR) - or broadly `Delhi Region' - is one of the most favored destinations of migrants from NER. Estimates suggest that currently in Delhi region, there are 90 to 100 thousand northeastern ethnic residences (Babu.P.Remesh, 2012). According to the reports over 414,850 people from Northeast India migrated to mega cities of the country during 2005 and 2010. It is 12 times growth as only 34,000 people had migrated during 2000-05 (North East support centre & helpline, Report, 2011). This fact was revealed in a research study conducted by North East Support Centre & Helpline, a New Delhi-based support center for migrants from Northeast India. The report also states that the annual average increase in migration from North East is 13.62 per cent. With more than 200,000 of North easterners migrating in the city, showing National capital as the most preferred region has increased challenges of both social capacity and acceptance. Northeast India's fractured relation with the mainland has been described as a cultural gap, an economic gap, a psychological gap and an emotional gap. The shared visual regime now carries the danger of this fault-line becoming racist. The society which is called the mainland India failed to integrate their own people, migrants in their existing society.

May be one may not think that north-easterners were any different or at least not more different than those from another Indian state having in mind that our country is the most secular and diverse nations of the world. This is something what *"we" endure, and not what "we" practice*. It is never taken in consideration by most of the so called 'mainland' dwellers that northeast states are the part of our diverse nation. The case shows the way in cosmopolitanism leads to differentiation between ethnic minorities and mainstream rather than seeking commonalities. The problem of commonalities to be politically incorrect should be felt outside India; instead it has segregated the North-easterners too, giving them a more complex notion of *'who they are and who they are not'*. This is largely marked due to the structural difference in culture and colonial history which separates the north eastern part of India from the rest of the Indian Sub continent. The cultural difference of the North Eastern Region and the Indian mainland is not a secret; both are to be

equally blamed for its failure to integrate. Hillary Clinton once said that "What we have to do... is to find a way to celebrate our diversity and debate our differences without fracturing our communities."

Ironically, most Indians see racism as a phenomenon that exists in other countries, particularly in the West, and without fail, see themselves as victims. We do not judge us harboring (potentially) racist attitudes and behavior towards others who are seen as inferior or 'outsiders' (Northeast Review, Word press, 2013). Shruti pandalai (2014) in her work blames media and political institutions for having least concern for the region and showing the region in country's black book. The concept of 'othering' that Shruti discusses goes both way and the other, which is not often reflected in media discourse as well as she also highlights the contested identities of North east in the city. It isn't just physical differences that make people from the northeast stand out in a big city like Delhi. The fact that they hail from societies that are culturally more permissive than mainstream India highlights their otherness in the eyes of other Indians. The study of cultures has traditionally focused on the intrinsic relation between people and their built environments as fixed in time and space (Noha Nasser, 2003). They suffer due to the perceived notion of the mainstream public domain, which is largely because of the differences in gender relations and structural differences in culture as well as appearance between the north and NER, which has led to the rise of sense of Indian diaspora. The local people consider them uncultured and even tease them calling 'chinky monkeys'. The main reason that drives this insane mentality is how they look different from others and their distinct cultures and traditions. Unprepared for not so welcoming nature of the city, the people from North East despite of being Indians are treated like outsiders resulting to social discrimination and racial attack. The main root cause is the social profiling of both the parts of the country, as the north dominated by patriarchal society while most of the NER has matriarchal dominance. The next paradigm shift to their sufferance is the girls being targeted by the human trafficking agents. Although the experience of racism faced by the north east residents of the mainland India is of a different order. It is much more "in your face", because of their different racial appearance, different ethnicity (skin color and looks, language, cultural indifferences and difficulty in pronouncing names).

However these migrants nevertheless manage to survive in a different environment and cultures far different from their own, thus making their own spaces identical to their culture and oneness. *While regions may or may not be important in people's daily lives, they are produced and reproduced by daily actions as part of a wider process of social reproduction (Anssi Passi, 2010).* Right from climate, eating habits, customs, and costumes - everything in Delhi is different for the migrants and adjusting to all these changed situations is the first Challenges confronted by them. The youth prefer to come as single migrants have created a notion of social coherence in the city as no. of these migrants stay together. Different races from the region stick together creating a 'social cohesion', which helps them to create a feeling of 'belongingness', where everyone shares a common identity. They have occupied a set of enclaves and concealed conclaves where they live, pray, socialize, celebrate and establish everyday patterns and rituals, as for them they have their own dictionary of being Indian, unlike the so called mainland dwellers.

The view that nationalism and national identity are rooted in a broad civilizational framework should not make us oblivious of the role of primordial, ethnic, religious and regional identities. One of the remarkable achievements of Indian civilization lies in its tolerance and accommodation of diverse identities as well as the facilitation of a creative synthesis of these identities (A.R Momin, 1996).

Inclusion & Citizenship

The Northeast region has always witnessed political turmoil, instability, security problems, conflicts, leading to less opportunity and stagnant life further to migration of the people to other parts of the country, 'mainland'. With the drive of rapid pace of urbanization, as per Delhi transforming to a global city, a little attention is given to the thousands of migrants leaving their region for work, refuge and study. Contemporary Indian metropolises are experiencing a rapid increase in migration from frontier areas, including large numbers of migrants from the Northeast region. This is significant given that migration involves engagement with the people and places of the Indian heartland, which clashes with the anti-India underpinnings of social and political life in the Northeast (Duncan McDuie-RA, 2012).

The feeling of being placeless and isolated still exists even though they adapt the local culture and dressing style. There is a huge cultural gap in between the mainland of the country and the NER. They suffer racism at every level of the city ranging from renting a house to getting a job or even getting promotion. The imaginative journey from borderland to heartland is cited by the experiences the Northeast migrants to the national capital faces ranging from racism, violence and discrimination in the Indian Cities highlighting the encounters between frontiers and heartlands. McDuie-RA (2013) stated these migrants as the "victims of the city" and also talked about their sense of creating own space by place making through neighborhood, food and faith identical to their existence as one community from one region. Experiencing all highs and lows Northeast migrants has created their own 'map' of Delhi, enabling a sense of belongingness keeping intact their identity. In considering identities and identity politics, it is important to remember that identities do not create social systems. Rather, social systems and their interlocking groups create identities as salient and separable. The concept of place-making to everyday life and social production of space provides a loose framework for analyzing the ways Northeastern migrants create places from the bottom-up (Henri Lefebvre, 1991). When a material space is inhabited, the space transforms and the place making occurs, allowing the patterns and rhythms of life to develop. They unite together in order to stand against oppression or simply to have someone else same cultural and regional history. They use various ways of cultural equations like music, dance, and food, art traditions to stay close to their regional identity and express themselves. This complex geography of identities is activated within particular conditions and circumstances and for particular purposes. New groups may form out of a collective sense of injustice, and people with the characteristics of the oppressed may coalesce into a unified group in order to act against a similarly identifiable adversary (W. Gamson, 1992).

From being called 'chinky' to harassment violence are almost the daily dose for these migrants. The pull factors though exist and are benefiting the migrants and instead being victims of racism, they have created their own map of Delhi. Thus, the ethnographic study of the spaces within Delhi occupied by the people from Northeast will an 'insight' view of their life in the city and will deepen our thoughts more towards their struggle to stand more as Northeastern Indian rather than just an

'outsider' as 'no man's land'. The fabrication of their identity in the domain of north Indian culture along with of their own cultural identity shapes and develops the surrounding community. This identity becomes more complex and fluid over time, but at the same time cultures themselves are not static, instead a culture develops and changes creating new identities. The sense of belonging does not depict Delhi itself, but to the localities within Delhi, where their little piece of home is created having the mark of their culture and keeping in a box their identities which they have managed to maintain making those spaces as home away from home. The borderland paradigm portrays the way people in Northeast look towards the 'mainland' challenging the notions of citizenship and belongingness. Their place making practices is in some way a type of performing citizenship, though there are boundaries between their culture and the others. In a culturally diverse society like Delhi, people may have different identities through the identification with several different sub-cultures but the interesting fact is to see how these people manage to continue their identity based on cultural heritage, birth place, regional or social identity, more as 'Indians' and survive in this city.

Conclusion:

The spaces, places, networks, and politics of Northeast life in Delhi demonstrate a complexity to contemporary life that is worthy of detailed analysis and has implications for studying ethnic minorities throughout globalizing Asia. From insurgency which emerged in the region since 1950s to its consequences which led its native to migrate made their lives miserable. The lack of government concern to negotiate the problems in the hills is the picture of endless years of erosion of democracy which failed its own people to survive peacefully within its jurisdiction. The stories and experiences of Northeast migrants give insights into what it means to belong to distinct ethnic minority communities in 21st century India. The experiences of Northeast migrants invite one to consider the ways in which tribal and other ethnic minority communities perceive their own identity, 'Indian' identity and society, and the degree to which they feel like they belong and don't belong to India. Moreover it is interesting to see how these spaces develop an alternative identity which is identical to the spaces on northeast region and culture. The experiences of Northeast community do not constitute the only story about racism in contemporary India, but it is their story that has opened fresh considerations of race, belonging, and national self understanding.

If identity is seen as the sum total of psychological experience (e.g. sensations, thoughts, feelings, motives), which forms our understanding of place, role, meaning in the world, then cultural identity can be conceived of as the result of our co-constructive interactions with the meanings, beliefs, thinking styles, practices and traditions that are implicit in our social environment and considered essential for our perception of our place role and meaning in a given culture in comparison to other cultures. The 'Northeast map' of Delhi is a collage of urban spaces where migrants have established a presence in order to navigate, negotiate, and survive the city. In doing so, North-easterners enact complex and multi-layered identities. People from Northeast engage in place-making practices by building neighborhoods and religious communities. They are not interested in shaping the way Delhi is developing and being governed, instead they are particular about their culture and contest to the instances where their rights as the citizens are violated, protecting their identity in the way of culture and place making. They make an attempt to have multiple identities as to be the part of the city without compromising with their ethnicity and identity as Northeastern. Therefore, this study is a modest attempt to bridge the gap between the northeastern people, who migrate to Delhi escaping fear and for better opportunities and their existence in the city as Indians without compromising with their actual 'identity' having cultural significance of the Northeast region. The dynamics of these seven states including Sikkim during the last 6 decades since independence have braved enormous difficulties. Both its geographical and cultural proximity with its neighboring 'mainland' within the country and the South East Asian countries make it a region of enormous economic importance in the future. It is necessary to take into consideration by both the centre government as well as the state along with its native that the region in itself holds an exquisite importance and beauty. Though the canvas is small but the myriad of experiences gone through by the people of Northeast Region is beyond one's understanding of state power relation.

The paper concludes over a single entity that no matter what, the idea of one's own culture and perceived traditions never changes with the space; it is the space which goes through the shifts of culture with the people it is occupied with. The Northeast migrants in Delhi having created their own territory within the city boundaries is the live example of transculturalism shaping its way

throughout the global space with the people migrating and creating livable spaces of their own particular identity within the traditional boundaries.

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