Geometrical and Theoretical Deconstruction of 'North-East' India

Kamei Samson[1] ⓘD

Abstract The paper explores the factors that induce people of so-called North-East India to collectively identify themselves as Northeasterners. It also examines the factors that lead them to be categorised by others as Northeasterners. This is done against the backdrop of a geometrical error in ascertaining the direction of so-called North-East India with reference to the present national capital, Delhi. The colonial project of categorisation of its subjects in the 'north-east frontier of Bengal' and sustained categorisation and identification of the same in free India is understood within the framework of social identity theory. Theoretically, the paper extends the social identity theory by adding the aspects of social validation and social invalidation to understand the materialisation and non-materialisation, respectively, of perceived social identity with respect to a group. To address the issues arising from the erroneous categorisation of places and people with a colonial arbitrary term 'North-East', the author proposes principles of individualisation and human rights. The principle of individualisation offers a possibility towards respecting the unique individual identity of the constituent groups of so-called North-East India and thus allows the ceasing of violation of human rights of the people.

Keywords North-East India · Social identity · Racism · Human rights · Social validation · Social invalidation

✉ Kamei Samson
samson.kamei@gmail.com

[1]   Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute,
      Jhusi, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh 211019, India

Introduction

Amongst all the regions of India, the one which is identified academically, politically, culturally and racially, more often than any other, is so-called North-East India. This regional name comprises the eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The nomenclature 'North-East India' is so deeply rooted in the common psyche, political discourse, and also popularised as an academic lexicon that no one seems to realise the need to re-examine its rationality, validity and, most importantly, its geometrical precision in the context of contemporary geopolitics. Many ignore and, perhaps, are disrespectful to the fact that cultural homogeneity is an anti-thesis to the so-called North-East. Baruah rules out common 'historical memory or collective consciousness' (2007, pp. 4–5) within the so-called North-East that can be nurtured to develop a shared aspiration. In fact, what engenders and sustains the false consciousness of uniformity has little to do with anything of the differences between the constituents of the so-called North-East. One of the things that engender a feeling of collectivity among them is their shared experience of racial discrimination and violence in other parts of India.

The perceived homogeneity of the identities in the so-called North-East is a colonial legacy. The false consciousness of a collective North-East identity is rendered abnormally normal. Expressing solidarity in the aftermath of reported attacks against the so-called Northeasterners, a former Chief Minister of Nagaland was reportedly quoted as saying: 'You must not consider yourself as a Naga, a Mizo, a Tripuri, or a Manipuri. You must consider yourself as a Northeasterner and a proud citizen of our great nation India' (*Huieyen* Lanpao, 2015, cited in Samson, 2017, p. 20). Such exhortation is best understood as 'Social

categorization of self' or 'self-categorization, [that] cognitively assimilates self to the ingroup prototype and thus depersonalizes self-conception' and 'brings self-perception and behaviour in line with the contextually relevant ingroup prototype' (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 5). However, such social categorisation of the distinct constituents of the so-called North-East is categorically invalidated in the words of McDuie-Ra: 'Certainly, the Northeast is not a singular category' (2016, p. 2). McDuie-Ra invalidates such social categorisation under the category called North-East.

There is no conformity between an emotionally driven cognitive process that conceptualises the North-East as a category and the contemporary geometrical inappropriateness of the position of the so-called North-East. The paper explores the factors that induce people of the so-called North-East to collectively identify themselves as North-easterners or being categorised by others as Northeasterners. It seeks to problematise the term 'North-East' against the backdrop of a geometrical error in such categorisation of and identification with the so-called North-East. A geometrical error means a mathematical error in locating the direction of the present so-called North-East India with respect to the Capital of India, Delhi. It is a mathematical error in the measurement of the degree within which the North-East direction, with respect to Delhi, is located. Moreover, the cultural and phenotypical features used to collectivise the people of the region are anomalies used pejoratively and vitriolically. However, it is an irony that such anomalies are ignored when compared with the self and social categorisation of the people of the region to strengthen their emotional resilience against discrimination and violence against them. Thus, there is social validation of the term Northeasterner by the people of the region. To encapsulate this anomalous phenomenon into a perspective, a glance into social identity theory is essential.

Social Identity

The instances of non-acceptance of the Indianness of those racially stigmatised as Chinese and racism against them opened a vista for theoretical extension of social identity with social validation and social invalidation. The issue of racism against Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese comes close to the proposed theory of social invalidation. The notion of the so-called North-East is also married to the individual's phenotypical features of some Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese. Such biological/personal elements turned social are captured by the element of interpersonal-intergroup continuum of social identity theory. Such is the state of experiential reality witnessed in the regional-biological continuum that makes social identity

theory relevant in this present paper. The phenomenon of clubbing the diverse cultural and linguistic groups in the region into a single category, North-East, and identification of the people of the region with such category, to make sense of their relationships with other Indians from outside the region, makes social identity theory relevant for the analysis of the term 'North-East'.

At the core of the theory of social identity is the contention that a person's self-identity is nurtured by a group(s) with which he or she identifies within a certain context. An individual carries not just personal selfhood, but multiple selves and identities associated with the affiliated groups in varying contexts.

Tajfel conceptualised social identity as 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership' (1972, p. 292, cited in Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 2). It is about a cognitive process in which an 'individual's self-concept' (Tajfel, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, cited in Greene, 2004, p. 137) is realised based on a 'self-perceived membership' in a group (Greene, 2004, p. 137). This results in an interpersonal-intergroup continuum in social identity. According to social identity theory, an individual invariably assesses his or her group positively as long as his or her self-identification hinges on his or her group membership. In social identity, there is a perception of 'greater differences' than actual differences and maximisation of differences between groups with growing 'favouritism towards' one's group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, cited in Greene, 2004, p. 137).

Social identity theory examines broadly the following processes: Social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison.

In social categorisation, we categorise people, ideas or things to understand them and smoothen the social intercourse in various contexts. This is required as voluminous data about an individual or a group, with whom one interacts, are not viable for conventional social intercourse. It also 'creates and defines an individual's *own* place in society' (Tajfel, 1972, p. 293, cited in Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 3). One's behaviour will be guided by the perceived features of the group one favourably categorises. Self-categorisation is the process of situating oneself in a group with respect to certain qualities as against certain other qualities of other groups (Oakes et al., 1994, p. 95). By ascertaining the categories through conscious selection and rejection of features, one understands oneself and others. Social categorisation which is a cognitive process '*by itself*' is a sufficient condition to engender discriminatory behaviours and attitudes in favour of one's group (Oakes et al., 1994, p. 80). The discrimination against other groups can be worsened when one aggressively pursues the maximisation of one's self-esteem which is significantly based

on the favourable characteristics of one's group. In doing so, one may even render legitimacy to concocted differences between the ingroup and the outgroup(s) in which the latter is or are disfavoured.

In social identification, one adopts the group that is favourably categorised. Turner says, 'The cognitive output of a salient social identification is the stereotypical perception of oneself and others in terms of the relevant social categorization' (1984, p. 528). Subsequently, individual acts in the ways that individual perceives members of that group do act. As a consequence of identification with that group, one develops emotional significance to that identification, and one's self-esteem turns out to be dependent on it. There is a natural propensity to positively assess oneself, and this subsequently impels one to positively assess a group with which one identifies in various contexts.

In social comparison, one compares favourably one's group against another group. In one of the collective methods of improving social identity, group members may engage in intergroup comparison in which ingroup favouritism and outgroup stereotyping may be exercised (Terry, 2001, p. 231). There is a need to distinctly identify one's group to render meaning to one's identification with the group and differentiate oneself from members of other groups. Such meaningful differentiation is possible only if one can identify the differences and compare with other groups based on those identified differences, even if they are concocted. The process of social comparison facilitates in explaining prejudice and discrimination. It is also related to self-esteem. To increase self-esteem, a group will tend to view members of competing groups negatively. This is because self-esteem immensely hinges on the positive qualities of one's group and the inferior state of all the outgroups. Just as social categorisation is sufficient enough to discriminate against others so is the case with social comparison.

Pointing out limitations in social identity theory Samson says, 'The theory does not explain the factor that induces an individual to identify his or her membership with a group as a natural member', and posed a question: '[…] what influences one's knowledge about one's membership in a group?' (2019, p. 1). Answering this, Kamei Samson says, 'identification of the individual as a member of the group by other members of the group' (2019, p. 2) is the driving force towards the materialisation of such identification. This issue was partly addressed by Christopher G. Ellison. Examining the role of Church—an institution where the whites are not invariably predominant—in imparting a positive self-perception, Ellison says, 'through formal and informal involvement in their church communities, these persons may gain affirmation that their personal conduct and emotions with regard to daily events, experiences, and community affairs are reasonable and appropriate' (1993, p. 1029). Ellison sparingly hints at a group's approval of one's behaviour acted out in tandem with identification with a group for the materialisation of social identification.

This limitation can be addressed with the theory of social validation and social invalidation. An individual's identification becomes meaningful only when such identification is validated or approved by the group he or she identifies with. The identification is rendered meaningless if invalidated or disapproved by the group members. The identification of the people from so-called North-East India with the Indian identity is not validated as manifested in their experiences of racism. There is still a need for wider and popular validation of their social identification with Indian identity.

Before entering into our exposition on various ideas of the so-called North-East let us examine, cursorily, some data that will help us in understanding the relative backwardness of the region. Such relative backwardness, perhaps, feeds into the minds of the racists inducing them to perceive the people of the region as culturally backward besides their phenotypical inferiority.

According to the 2011 Census, 81.6 per cent of the population in the region live in rural areas (Saikia & Das, 2014). But it produces merely 1.5 per cent of the country's food grains (Jana & Basu, 2018). The backwardness of the region is not of a recent origin. Sanjeeb Kakoty traces its origin to the colonial plan to keep the region backwards for successful warding off of Burma (Myanmar) from British India (2020). Such constricted development activities in the region continued to prove to be disadvantageous for India. Thus, Pushpita Das attributed the victory of China in the 1962 war to the infrastructural backwardness of so-called North-East India (2009, cited in Kakoty, 2020). Lessons seem to have not been learned as 75 per cent of the roads in the region remain unsurfaced (Das, 2009, cited in Kakoty, 2020). The topographical terrain marked predominantly by hills and forests has been termed as 'one of the greatest constraints to rapid economic development' by Rakesh Mohan, Deputy Governor of Reserve Bank of India (2003, p. 930). Despite the North East Industrial Policy (1997) not much have changed. A study in 2004 to evaluate its impact conducted by Tata Economic Consultancy Services found that a major chunk, 94 per cent, of the investments was in Assam and Meghalaya (Hrahsel & Umdor, 2019). Such is the extent of intra-regional disparities in development activities.

According To K P Singh and Shakeel Ahmad, the institutions of higher education were established 'comparatively late' in the region (2012). While the first college in the region was established in 1901, the region had its first Central University only in 1973 (Singh & Ahmad, 2012). In the state of Manipur, Noney (Longmai) district has only

one college. While the literacy rate of six of the eight states in the region is higher than the national average (74.04 per cent), according to the 2011 Census (Zaidi, 2013), the state of affairs of higher education is dismal. The percentage of Secondary Schools with pucca buildings at the national level is 81.40, but it is only 2.20 per cent in the state of Nagaland and 11.10 per cent in Mizoram (NUEPA (2012): SEMIS 2009–10, cited in Zaidi, 2013, p. 24).

Of the total 23,887 Primary Health Centres in India, only 6.32 per cent is located in the whole of the region (Bulletin on Rural Health Statistics in India, 2011, cited in Saikia & Das, 2014, p. 82). And according to the same source, out of 4809 Community Health Centres, only 5.07 per cent is located in the region.

Thus, there are several instances to paint a picture of the backwardness of the region in terms of health, education, infrastructural development, etc. This state of backwardness in development in the region seems to produce a negative idea about the people too. The people are also categorised as materially and culturally not advanced.

North-East as a Concept

North-East India is a concept that underwent a series of historical, political, economic, and cultural processes. Since its inception during the colonial days, it has been undergoing several phases and developed different connotations. However, the colonial disposition continues to overwhelm all the other emerging ideas of 'North-East'. The colonial disposition, marked by negative categorisation and subjugation, persists in all the connotations of the North-Easts.

From its maiden usage as a colonial administrative lexicon, it evolved to gain popularity in free India's development discourses. Thus, the armed struggles in so-called North-East India are, often blatantly, categorised into development issues. Given the aspiration of the Indian state for peace in the region as a prelude to infrastructural development, as part of strategic needs, one observes persistent militarisation of the political nature of the problems in the region. The apotheosis of the categorisation of the problems in the region is witnessed in the development discourses evolving around the so-called North-East. Such development discourses are animated through categories such as 'Look East Policy', 'Look East through North-East', 'Act East' and 'North-East Vision 2020'. The benefits of the policy are beginning to be seriously doubted by the people in the region (Dubey, 2014). In several casual discussions, such concepts are associated with flesh trade, flourishing of the drug business, reportedly involving even an Indian Army Colonel (India Today, 2013), and decimation of local economies. Besides the economic hypes,

what makes the concept North-East popular is the experiences of discrimination and racially sedated violence committed against people of this region.

Kamei Samson has critically examined the term North-East and deduced from its evolutionary trajectory the following: Colonial North-East, Strategic 'North-East', and Racial 'North-East' (2017, pp. 21–24). Kamei Samson used the term North-East in the Strategic 'North-East' and Racial 'North-East' with single inverted commas for North-East to emphasise the geometrical error in the aforesaid two terms unlike in his Colonial North-East. This emphasis will be retained in this paper. While Kamei Samson's *North-east and Chinky: Countenances of Racism in India* (2017) is merely descriptive, the present paper is a social-psychological analysis of the origin, evolutionary processes, contemporary usage and even possible direction of new developments of the concept North-East. The present paper borrows heavily from the work of Kamei Samson (2017) because of the already well-defined categories of North-East.

Colonial North-East

The Colonial North-East is explicit in the Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal, in 1869. The Memorandum says:

> The north-east frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense, it embraces the whole of the hill ranges north, east, and south of the Assam Valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges (Mackenzie, 2007, p. 1, cited in Samson, 2017, p. 21).

From the above reference to 'north-east', it is clear that the concept is appropriate only with reference to Calcutta in Bengal, the then Capital of British India until 1911. Symmetrically and horizontally placing the centre point of a geometrical instrument, protractor, on Kolkata on a political map, it is possible to locate almost all the states of the present so-called North-East region within the sector of 45 degrees to the north-east of Kolkata with 22.5 degrees each on either side of an acute-angled line drawn at 45 degrees within the first quarter of a 360-degree circle. Thus, the frontier was accurately termed as the 'north-east frontier of Bengal'. It may then be stretched even to say north-east British-India or simply north-east India.

The year 1911 witnessed a change of British-India Capital from Calcutta to Delhi (De, 2011). Delhi became the epicentre of British-India colonial politics in 1911. And Delhi continues to be the political epicentre of free India in

contemporary geopolitics. However, that 'north-east' of the 'northeast frontier of Bengal' coined during the colonial era when Calcutta was the Capital of British-India continues to refer to the part of India that is now, for Delhi, the East of India. Following similar geometrical measurements, one will find that the erstwhile 'north-east frontier of Bengal' is now to the East of Delhi and may even be called the East of New Delhi in the sense of projecting New Delhi as the political identity of India in contemporary geopolitics. And Gangmumei Kamei aptly writes, 'Manipur is situated at the eastern frontier of India' (2015, p. 8). This is a deviation from the conventional practice of locating Manipur in so-called North-East India.

In 1873, the people of the colonial North-East were isolated by the Inner Line Regulation which is now popularly known under the name Inner Line Permit. The British enacted it to regulate commercial activities between its subjects in the valley and the Frontier Tribes (Chowdhury, 1989, p. 35, cited in Samson, 2017, p. 21). The former subjects may also be called centric subjects as they are at the centre of the colonial economic interests of the British. It is with these subjects that the colonial rule flourished most efficiently. This is so because the land settled by the centric subjects is either valley or plain where colonial administration, including taxation and conscription, was much easier as compared with the hilly terrains (see Scott, 2010). The people in the plain and valley also constituted the most protected colonised people of British India. It was not in the interest of protecting the cultural identity of the hill people in the peripheries that such a regulation was imposed. The colonial interest did not extend to such selfless magnanimity. It was meticulously designed to engender a sense of distinctive identity among the people that would ultimately allow for divisive policies to further their colonial rule. Such categorisation of the centric subjects and the frontier tribes constricted interactions between the groups. To enhance psychological and cultural division between the centric subjects and the people in the peripheries, the colonial power also represented the latter group as wild and savage. The centric subjects seemed to find the frontier tribes relevant primarily for negatively comparing with them.

The categorisation of 'north-east frontier of Bengal' was an imperialist design though it was geometrically apt. It was to serve the colonial interests that such a complex region under colonial rule was clubbed into a category. It facilitated them to conveniently refer to them as a unit. Such categorisation was without the knowledge and consent of the people. It was a convenient administrative tool in a scheme of colonial subjugation. As categorisation is sometimes carried out randomly with 'trivial ad hoc criteria' (Billig & Tajfel, 1973, cited in Turner, 1984, p. 522), such categories were arbitrary and disparaging. Thus, in writing about or categorising the collection of the aforesaid kingdoms and village republics of the colonial North-East, Alexander Mackenzie says that the 'north-east frontier of Bengal' is used 'sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally [and not specifically] to describe a tract' (Mackenzie, 2007, p. 1). There is no precision but imperial arbitrariness in the 'north-east frontier of Bengal'.

From a theoretical standpoint, it may be postulated that social categorisation can be independent of social identification. But social identification cannot be without social categorisation. For social identification to operate, there is a need for a contingent or at least a single shared characteristic of a group with which an individual has to identify. The category North-East inherited from the colonial rule served the purpose of collectively categorising the people of the said region while the people in the region, during the colonial days, were not even aware of such category for them to identify with. The Colonial North-East was not validated by the people in the region due to their ignorance. It is widely validated and used in an academic circle from within the region as a category to analyse political situations and relations with other Indian states.

Strategic 'North-East'

The upheavals in the so-called North-East after the independence in 1947, witnessed in the form of several people's movements for self-determination, homeland, autonomy, religious and language movements, etc., have rendered the region a 'disturbed area'. This gave rise to a new understanding of the North-East that may be termed as Strategic 'North-East' (see Samson, 2017). Until 1951, the Indian Government is known to have imposed in the region all the colonial restrictions inherited from the colonial power (Chowdhury, 1989, p. 36, cited in Samson, 2017, p. 22). There has been an acute militarisation of political issues. The inhumane military operation (Operation Bluebird) carried out at Oinam, a Naga village in Senapati district of Manipur, the bombing in Mizoram by the Indian Air Force that compels the Mizos even today to protest with words such as 'No India, No Cry' (Times of India, 2011), forceful resettlement of villagers to cut off non-state armed groups from receiving supports from villagers, unfortunately, remain the defining characteristics of the Indian State for the innocent victims and their progenies. The rape of a 'mentally disturbed girl *in public*' [emphasis mine] by an Indian Army soldier in Assam in 1999 (National Human Rights Commission, 2018) seems to legitimise any form of violence by the state against enemy-like so-called North-East people who are racially stigmatised as Chinese. A mass grave found in Tombisana High School located in Imphal, Manipur, in the year 2014 (*India Today*, 2014) sent a rippling effect of chilling fear. It

compelled the people to form an image of the state which is sadistic. The school was reportedly occupied and used as a camp by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) 49 Battalion for over 20 years. Babloo Loitongbam, Director of Human Rights Alert, reportedly termed the graveyard as 'possibly the graveyard of fake encounters' (*India* Today, 2014). There is a widely shared feeling of being categorised as the enemy of the state and a common apprehension of being categorised as possible targets of what appears to be systematic state violence against its people.

Henri Tajfel depended on the feeling of belonging to a group to define a collection of people as a group. This he draws from a different context which is not dissimilar, i.e. the definition of a nation as proffered by a historian, Rupert Emerson. According to Emerson, 'The simplest statement that can be made about a nation is that it is a body of people who feel that they are a nation, and it may be that when all the fine-spun analysis is concluded, this will be the ultimate statement as well' (1960, p. 102, cited in Tajfel, 1978a, p. 402). It would be blatant to doubt the feeling of Indian nationalism among the victims of state violence, usually perceived to be reserved for enemy countries. State violence against its people in so-called North-East India is psychologically aggravated due to the almost ineffective institutionalised redressal mechanism. There seems to be an informal categorisation of the region and the people as inherently violent to justify the violence of the state. Such categorisation is also widely shared within the media fraternity that often depicts news predominantly related to violence. There is an unhealthy stereotyping of the region with violent characteristics. Kashmir and North-East have become the manna of national security analysts.

The military operations have drastically scaled down in the so-called North-East when compared with those days in the 1950s to 1990s. However, the strategic attitude towards the so-called North-East persists even today which is made unequivocal in the words of the Ministry of Home Affairs, North East Division. It says, 'Unlike other parts of the country the North East holds an important position from a strategic point of view as these states share their borders with other countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China' (Ministry of Home Affairs, *Government of India*, 2015, cited in Samson, 2017, p. 21). It is this debilitative institutionalised strategic outlook and seemingly systematic violence against its people that negatively compare against the people of the region. Such categorisation of the region by the federal government legitimises the stereotype attached to the region as a violent region that shares borders with unfriendly nations. The corollary of this is the production of an image of the people of the region as naturally violent and as a natural enemy of the state.

While the British rule in India was condemned as colonial, the people of the so-called North-East region bore the burden of the colonial rule until 1951 (Chowdhury, 1989, p. 36, cited in Samson, 2017, p. 22). The colonial arbitrary categorisation into the North-East sans social identification with such category by the categorised people continued to linger in *British-free India*. The prolonged engagement of the Indian state in a state of camouflaged war against its people since the 1940s in the so-called North-East region, unfortunately, resulted in the categorisation of the population of the region and their cultures as violent. The war between India and China in 1962 further worsened the perpetuated colonial strategic categorisation of the place into producing an erroneously perceived category of traitors. The defeat in the 1962 war later produced a new category within the North-East region to be hated as pro-China.

Henri Tajfel says ideas and beliefs which are generally accepted, whether one accepts it or not 'remain within a *framework* of socially shared meanings and assumptions, as well as within the common and socially established means, modes and principles of social communication' (1978b, p. 303). The Indians in British-free India failed to attain freedom from colonially 'shared meanings and assumptions' about the people of the so-called North-East and the colonial arbitrariness of militarising and categorising the 'north-east frontier of Bengal' for economic gains remains a re-established 'means, modes and principles of social communication' and categorisation. With occasional feuds with China on the international border and the continued occupation of parts of Arunachal Pradesh, such categorisation of the region as strategically sensitive remains indispensable for India.

The strongest determinant of any kind of relationship with the people of the so-called North-East is the national strategic interests. The frequent trips to various parts of India organised by the Assam Rifles for school students studying in the so-called North-East region are conducted under the theme of national integration. The students or the children are categorised as potential threats to the nation if left with limited or no exposure to the rest of the country. To deprive them of the anti-India feeling, such a strategy becomes essential. School students are also formally taken to military camps and exposed to arms and ammunition to instil a desire to join the Indian armed forces. Such tours are organised 'to develop a better understanding about their nation and develop a strong sense of nationalism' (The Shillong Times, 2020). This breeds a sense of belonging to the Indianness and views the non-state armed groups as others. The underlying belief of such national integration is that the people in the region are not natural Indians and so needs to be nurtured into Indians. Thus, there is social invalidation of the natural Indianness of the people of the

so-called North-East region because of the institutionalised strategic outlook.

Racial 'North-East'

To understand the process of social categorisation based on certain perceived similarities and differences, it will suffice to say that race is a social construct (Lavalette & Penketh, 2014, p. ix). While race is void of reality, racism is an experiential reality. Thus, racism is defined as '[…] conduct or words or practices which disadvantage or advantage people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin' (Macpherson, 1999). The phenotypical differences one witnesses in everyday life—more varied in a heterogeneous society—often convince us of assuming race as a sensual reality.

The propensity to simplify one's cognitive process in a complex heterogeneous world for simple meaningful social intercourse through social and self-categorisation renders one ignorant of Lavalette and Penketh's observation of the wide genetic differences within one's group (2014, p. ix). There is an effort to maximise the lesser differences one finds between groups (Lavalette & Penketh, 2014, p. ix). Trying to make sense of racism, one is reminded of the principle of 'metacontrast' of social identity theory in which one tends to increase the ratio of the differences between groups to the differences within a group (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 5). The principle of metacontrast may be looked at as a major relationship between theories on racism and social identity. Racism can also be animated when there is a heightened perceived difference between groups.

The colonial power efficiently segregated the people of the 'north-east frontier of Bengal' to the extent of personification of violence and savagery into their personalities. In the colonial North-East region, the frontier tribes were segregated from the Hindus in the Assam valley and Manipur valley. Violence and savagery were seemingly earmarked for the frontier tribes whose belief systems were derogatorily categorised into superstition. This animation of violence and savagery into the personalities of the people of the frontier tribes is found to be facilitative for negative social categorisation even after independence because of the political disturbances in the region. This difference in the phenotypical and cultural features remains embedded in the common psyche of many Indians and is relevant for categorisation with stigma.

The strategic approach of the Indian state to tackle issues of insurgency breeds and promotes unintended racial discrimination against the people of so-called North-East India. Due to this, the so-called North-East is often depicted in several media as a typical place of violence, insurgencies, and thus anti-Nationalism. The distinct categorisation of certain Indian groups from so-called North-East India as different from the other groups in India further widened the gaps between them. Kamei Samson sees an unhealthy propensity to assume the so-called North-East region as areas predominantly settled by Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese (2017, p. 24). This propensity towards categorisation of the phenotypically different people of the so-called North-East as distinct leads to erroneous categorisation of the region. The so-called North-East region is callously associated with certain phenotypical features. China being an unfriendly nation, a derogatory phenotypical category is used to racially categorise certain groups of Indians as Chinese. They are, according to an activist Binalakshmi Nepram, also dubbed as pro-China (*Morung Express*, 2014, cited in Samson, 2017). Stephen Reicher says, 'In a world of nations, we are likely to conceptualize ourselves and others in national terms' (2004, p. 935). Unfortunately, in India, the Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese are callously grouped into a foreign national category. The seeming ignorance of several fellow Indians who situate the Chinese in the so-called North-East region of India results in social invalidation of the sense of Indian identity of the people racially stigmatised as Chinese.

Social categorisation is immensely influenced by social acquiescence and determined by the prevailing value systems (Tajfel, 1972, p. 276). The prevailing state of relationship with China is marked by hatred and anger. The occasional skirmishes between Indian soldiers and Chinese soldiers reported from the borders sustain and aggravate animosity against the Chinese and anyone looking similar to them. The prevailing aura in India, among others, is nationalism and anger against China, besides Pakistan. And as 'group members will seek to differentiate themselves from the outgroup on valued dimensions of comparison' (Reicher, 2004, p. 929), being against China enjoys social acquiescence. Hatred for Chinese and Pakistanis seem to have become a popularised strand of nationalism in India. Amid this, Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese suffer from social invalidation of their *claimed* Indianness. Binalakshmi Nepram emotively claimed the Indianness of the people from so-called North-East India (*Morung Express*, 2014, cited in Samson, 2017).

It is often observed that some Indians act racially with fellow Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese and with the so-called North-East region. It is no longer very strange to encounter some Indians, especially in Metropolitan cities, calling a male racially stigmatised as Chinese from so-called North-East India *'Chinky Bhaiya'* (Chinky brother). Ignoring the Indianness of the Indians from so-called North-East India, the phenotypical similarities between the Indians from so-called North-East India, and the terms 'Chinese' and 'Nepalese' are used

derogatorily to maximise the differences between the Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese and other Indians. This is social invalidation of the social identification with the Indian identity of the Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese. The presence of people who are racially stigmatised as Chinese in places outside so-called North-East India is not a recent trend. Even before and during a war with China in 1962, there were Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese in other parts of India. However, the humiliating defeat in the hands of the Chinese in 1962 may be a major contributory factor towards racism against Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese. Based on lived experiences, the sight of people who are racially stigmatised as Chinese seems to readily stir up a sense of defeat and humiliation and a desire for revenge. The sense of humiliation and defeat at the hands of the Chinese in the 1962 war is deeply ingrained in the psyche of many Indians (Dutta, 1999; Frayer, 2021). This requires the racists to systematise their relations with those who are racially stigmatised as Chinese. To allow systematic and orderly relations in a social environment, social categorisation becomes essential to give effect to a meaningful relation (Tajfel, 1972, p. 298). Unfortunately, some Indians chose discrimination and stigmatisation—even to the extent of violence causing death—as a meaningful relationship to be maintained with the Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese. Stephen Reicher says, 'if categories serve to legitimate social relations, they must be seen as necessary rather than contingent' (2004, p. 926). For the racists in India, the name 'Chinese' used for fellow Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese has become a 'necessary' category to legitimise their normalised social intercourse with the latter. The use of such a name as 'Chinese' is not contingent upon the occasional aggressions by the Chinese soldiers along the border.

Speaking of the functions of categorisation Henri Tajfel says, 'we ignore certain similarities if these similarities are irrelevant for our purposes' (1978b, p. 305). One's national identity is so natural that it loses its significance in routine social intercourse. The basic shared identity across Indians is their nationality. But this shared feature is irrelevant in the context of the relationship witnessed in one's daily life. In comparing negatively against the so-called Northeasterners, racists ignore the fact that 'being able to say that two things differ always implies that they share a higher level identity in terms of which the comparison is meaningful' (Oakes et al., 1994, p. 99). The shared nationality is ignored to fulfil the purpose of discrimination. We find even the differences between the Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese and the real Chinese are ignored. Typically, the pattern of a conception of an Indian identity among some Indians is an exclusion of the common Southeast Asian phenotypical features, particularly those of

the Chinese. Therefore, there is no complete social validation of the social identification of the Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese with Indian identity.

Examining the criteria for defining a nation, Tajfel (1978c) says both criteria of 'similarity' of the people and 'inter-dependence of fate' cannot contribute towards a nation. Concurring with Emerson's '"felt" common identity of members of a national group' Tajfel says,

> the most important "similarity" left is that the individuals concerned are consensually referred to by a common label, both by other people and by themselves, and that this common label defines at the same time their national group membership *and* circumscribes the variety of social situations in which they feel or behave as a function of that membership (1978c, p. 425).

Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese are derogatorily called *Chinky, Chinese and Nepali*. Such terms do not concur with the conventional term 'Indians' for the citizens of India. When these terms are used to categorise the Indians racially stigmatised as Chinese, even a pious nationalism among the so-called North-East people is invalidated. Instead of nationalism what is experienced is racism.

Social categorisation and social identification cannot be assumed to be happening in any pattern. Richard Jenkins says that given an absence of an 'utterly isolated—and implausible—band, small enough to lack significant internal sub-groupings, it seems sensible to suggest that groups necessarily exist in relation to other groups: to categorise and to be categorised in turn' (2008, p. 110). This seems to strongly suggest that there is categorisation first before identification. However, Jenkins further debunks such notion and says,

> Group identification, therefore, proceeds hand in glove with categorisation. Although it makes figurative sense to talk about groups being constituted "in the first instance" by internal definition [identification]—after all, without their members relating to each other, and defining themselves as members, there would be nothing to belong to—this should not be misconstrued literally and chronologically, to mean first group identification, then categorisation (2008, p. 110).

Given the so-called North-East as a colonial legacy, one may safely contend that the social categorisation of the so-called North-East preceded social identification as Northeasterners. Social comparison between the positively stereotyped Indian identity and the stigmatised North-East identity proffered a scope for furthering the self-ascribed positive attributes enjoyed by the racists because the so-

called North-East is—since colonial days—deridingly linked with 'barbarism' and 'backwardness'.

When values are taken as criteria for social categorisation, differentiations become easy and evaluative (Tajfel, 1972, p. 282). With social norms and moral codes still predominant in a communitarian society as in India, values are held very dearly. One's image and self-respect are immensely shaped by one's identification with the values. Racialisation of values is a common means of social categorisation. Relatively liberal values of the people of the so-called North-East region is stigmatised as immoral stemming from Western cultures traced to Christianity. This improves the effort to distinctly categorise the Northeasterners as immoral and therefore non-Indians.

The Alternatives

East India sounds geometrically and politically appropriate for the present so-called North-East India when New Delhi defines India in geopolitics. However, regionalising the states and the people who are readily viewed differently because of their inevitable phenotypical features is bound to undergo again a process of the racialisation of even the geometrically and politically appropriate term for the region. The names of all the states of the so-called North-East are the available alternatives to the arbitrarily racialised North-East. This will herald a new perspective towards the places and the people of this part of the country. A desire to know about all the states of the so-called North-East needs to be inculcated in the process of distinctly identifying the states. The colonial collective North-East identity needs to be deconstructed in favour of cultural diversity and a mosaic of independent world views despite some shared lived experiences.

The principle of individualisation rather than categorisation needs to be adopted in political, economic, or cultural intercourses with the people of the region. The individualisation of the states would mean an institutionalised effort to know and understand the unique narratives of each state. This will serve in undoing the disparaging tendency to racially categorise the people of the so-called North-East. The propensity to categorise, to facilitate a swift and efficient understanding of the world around us, must not be allowed to breed a sense of lesser importance of the constituents.

The governance of a nation must not be entirely based on the needs of the bureaucratic system of the administration. Governmentality must spring from the principle of human rights of the governed. And in a democratic country with people as the epicentre of government and governance, the human rights of the people must be the core fabric of politics. Identity is one of the inalienable,

indivisible, and interdependent human rights. Developments, welfare schemes, adult franchise, taxation, and national security are some of the common aspects of governance and are very much integral to the human rights of the people. Human rights cannot be subjected to a state akin to Abraham Maslow's needs hierarchy. There cannot be a hierarchy of human rights.

Governmentality and governance must be shaped to suit the existing or evolving identity discourses of the people. According to Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), every individual has the right to free development of his or her personality. And Article 12 guarantees protection from any arbitrary interference with the 'privacy, family, home or correspondence' and 'attacks on his honour or reputation'. Privacy is a matter of personal identity, and family being the basic unit of a society is also a matter of social identity. Honour and reputation are matters of both personal and social identity. According to Article 1(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 'All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development'. A state cannot claim arbitrary prerogative over the right of self-determination of the people in matters concerning identity. Hogg and Terry observed: 'People are not content to have their identity determined by the social-cognitive context. On the contrary, they say and do things to try to change the parameters so that a subjectively more meaningful and self-favouring identity becomes salient' (2001, p. 7). How an individual should be best known is how he or she knows himself or herself or wishes to be known. Because self or social 'categorization is as much about becoming as about being' (Reicher, 2004, p. 935). And according to Article 15(1) of the UDHR, every individual has the right to a nationality. Names such as *Chinky, Nepali and Chinese* are disparaging the human right(s) of the Indians who are racially stigmatised as Chinese and it is a crime against humanity. It impinges upon their right to a nationality. Clubbing the eight states into a singular identity as North-East inherited from colonial legacy is also a deviation from the human rights of the people of all these states and therefore a gross institutional discrimination and human rights violation.

Conclusion

For meaningful social intercourse, grouping similar items in an environment, under certain shared features, while differentiating them from others based on the same features, is a condition *sine qua non* of adaptations and survival for the social group and individual in various contexts (Tajfel, 1972, p. 274). The author analysed the social-

psychological dimension of the various categories of so-called North-East as they evolve since the colonial days. In identifying the element of racism in the concept North-East as a consequence of colonial design and strategic needs, the author intends to exhort cessation of the use of the term North-East. The evolution of the concept North-East from colonial conception through strategic and racial conceptions witnessed a gradual gradation of the negative effects of such a concept. It has allowed for the production of more perceived differences which overwhelm the foundational commonality of nationality. Successful integration of the people hinges not on viewing the so-called North-East as a category of culture but as lands of diverse free Indians in free India and not in British-free India. This will be possible if fellow Indians and the State adopt the principles of individualisation and human rights towards the people and their lands which are inherently linked with their self and collective identities.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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