From colonial 'mongoloid' to neoliberal 'northeastern': theorising 'race', racialization and racism in contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary India has witnessed a rise in racism discourse, central to which are people from North-East and Himalayan regions, collectively referred to as 'Northeasterns'. This has recentred 'race' and racism as being a theoretical-political problem of contemporary India itself. However, existing literature shows that there is stark under-theorisation of 'race' and racism in Indian context. Drawing from ethnographic research and applying the racialization approach, this paper argues that 'race' in India is a postcolonial-neoliberal construct, whereby colonial 'Mongoloid' is reconstructed into neoliberal 'Northeastern', such that 'race' in India acts as a layered mode of constructing identity and difference. It further argues that the 'Northeastern' category emerges as a result of exclusion from the 'Indian' category, which itself is racialized along Hinduised-Aryanised lines, such that racism is a product of a postcolonial centre-periphery power-relation between India and its North-East; thereby making way for critical 'race' scholarship in the Indian context.

Introduction: 'race' and racism as theoretical and political problems of contemporary India

We know that there is racism here, but how do we understand the meaning of race in India?

Having said these words, Dibya took a short reflective pause and continued,

Because, when we say race, it is usually understood it as a black-white thing that happens in Western countries. However, the Constitution of India (Article 15) says that there should be no discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste, sex and place of birth. So, what does race exactly mean in the Indian context?

In the aforementioned conversation, Dibya (pseudonym) who is a research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, and with whom I also share the privilege of being a friend, put forth a seminal question in regard to 'race'[1] and racism in the Indian context. In her question, which she posed to me, she firstly highlights the fact that while racism has emerged as a problem of contemporary India, there is an under-theorisation of 'race'

in the Indian context. Her statement reveals that while 'race' and racism have been conventionally viewed as a black-white phenomenon and a problem of Western societies, in recent years, 'race' and racism are increasingly becoming re-centred as a problem internal to contemporary India itself. By citing the Indian Constitution, Dibya further underlines the obscurity of the concept of 'race' in India, not only in academia but also policy frameworks. Furthermore, hailing from the Eastern Himalayan town of Darjeeling and being identified as a 'Northeastern' in Delhi, her statement shows that central to experiences of 'race' and racism are people from North-East and Himalayan regions in 'mainland' Indian cities. This paper addresses Dibya's question, which is precisely the question of theorising 'race' and racism in contemporary India, through the case study of 'Northeastern' migrants in Delhi.

Racism in contemporary India is being articulated in diverse forms, including anti-black discrimination against Siddis and African migrants,[2] colourism,[3] Islamophobia,[4] communalism, some even may argue casteism and the rise of Hindu nationalism, which are different facets of global raciality.[5] While these manifestations of exclusion and discrimination are equally prevalent, it is discrimination against 'Northeasterns' that has predominantly shaped racism discourse in India. The region that has come to be known as 'North-East India' refers to eight federal states of Indian Union, including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. Located in the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, this region shares international borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet (China); and is therefore often referred to as Asia's quintessential borderland – the stretch of land where South Asia ends, and South East Asia begins.[6] While the regional category of North-East is often viewed as a homogenous and monolithic entity when viewed from the centres or 'mainland's' point of view – the North-East in reality is ethno-culturally diverse, such that this geo-administrative category fails to capture the plurality of the region. Following this, the 'Northeastern' technically refers to any person hailing from one of the eight North-Eastern states, belonging to the diverse indigenous and ethno-tribal communities of the region, making the identity category of 'Northeastern' ambiguous if not redundant.[7] However, today the term 'Northeastern' has come to be associated with people who have certain physical features described through the colonial racialized category of 'Mongoloid', such that the definition often extends to people from the Himalayan regions of Indian subcontinent like Ladakh and Darjeeling who have historically been racialized along similar lines.[8] This paper uses the term North-East to refer to the borderland region and 'Northeastern' to refer to the racialized category without meaning to reify them but rather for the purpose of analysis.

Racism discourse in India in relation to the 'Northeastern' category can be contextualised within the liberalisation of Indian economy since 1991, which resulted in acceleration of migration from the North-East and Himalayan regions to urban centres in 'mainland' India. The rise in migration was accompanied by a corresponding rise in discrimination against these migrants, who increasingly used the language of racism to articulate their experiences, giving rise to racism discourse in contemporary Indian public sphere.[9] It was a series of spectacular racisms including the suicide of Dana Sangma in Delhi in 2012; the murder of Richard Loitam in Bangalore in 2012; and the lynching of Nido Tania in Delhi in 2014, among others similar incidents, that consolidated racism discourse in contemporary India. Recently, discrimination against

'Northeastern' in 'mainland' cities during the Covid19 pandemic, where they were labelled as 'corona' and 'virus' by identifying their phenotypical features as a signifier of the virus that originated in China, further sparked racism discourse.[10] These developments indicate that, while earlier 'race' and racism were generally seen as theoretical and political problems of the West, whereby Indians became susceptible to it only after emigrating to Western countries, discrimination against 'Northeasterns' increasingly recentred 'race' and racism as a theoretical-political problem of contemporary India itself, which warrants further scholarly engagement.

The rise in racism discourse in the Indian public sphere also resulted in the birth of 'new racism studies' mostly pioneered by scholars engaging with various socio-political aspects of the North-East and Himalayan regions. While these works are seminal in examining racism in India, a key gap in existing literature remains to be the problem of the under-theorisation of 'race' and racism in the Indian context.[11] Faced with this problem, this paper draws from critical 'race' scholarship's racialization approach as an appropriate lens to re-frame 'race' and racism in India, particularly in relation to the 'Northeastern' category. The first half of the paper sets the context and reviews existing literature relevant to this given topic. It starts by giving a brief background of the historical relationship between India and its North-East; and then traces the genealogy of the concept of 'race' in India, thereby identifying gaps in existing knowledge. The second half of the paper utilises the racialization approach to analyse empirical materials and in turn provides four-fold theoretical insights into 'race' and racism through the examination of the 'Northeastern' category in contemporary India. While this paper is theoretical, it is empirically grounded in my ethnographic study based on my PhD research, conducted between 2015 and 2019, where data were collected through in-depth qualitative interviews among 40 participants, who were from different parts of the North-East and Himalayan regions living in Delhi.

India and *its* north-east: setting the historical context and centre-periphery relationship

Before diving into theoretical questions on 'race' and racism in the context of the 'Northeastern' category in contemporary India, it is first and foremost necessary to situate the topic within the historical context of the relationship between India and *its* North-East. The concept of North-East was birthed under the British colonial regime in the 19th century, where it was conceived to physically and epistemologically demarcate the eastern-most frontier of British India.[12] It was precisely Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Home Secretary to the Government of British India, who coined the term 'North-East' in his book titled, 'The North-East Frontier of British India'[13] to identify a distinct geo-administrative region, such that the concept of 'North-East' itself is a colonial construct. The colonial administration of North-East followed a policy of exclusion in the form of Inner Line Regulation (1873), and later demarcating parts of the region as 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' (1935), further marginalising the North-East as the periphery of the colonial centre. The colonial regime also crudely classified the diverse communities of the frontier region as 'primitive', 'savage', 'Mongoloid tribes', constructing the North-East as the 'Mongoloid' fringe of India – a peripheral appendage, racially and culturally different from the rest of the subcontinent.[14]

With the independence of India in 1947, the North-East became transformed from being a colonial frontier to postcolonial borderland, which has had a contested relationship with the Indian state. Independence from the British did not mean independence for communities in the North-East, who became minoritized within the new nation-state, such that postcolonial North-East witnessed an emergence of ethno-nationalist movements, whose demands ranged from federal autonomy to secessionism.[15] Insurgency in parts of the North-East was violently suppressed by the Indian state, particularly through implementing the Arms Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which has been criticised as a regime of military state within the façade of democracy.[16] As such, postcolonial North-East continued to be the periphery of the Indian centre, such that this centre-periphery power relation has often been referred to as a form of internal colonialism practiced by the postcolonial Indian state on North-East.,[17][18] To contain insurgency, the Indian state also implemented the North-Eastern States Reorganisation Act (1971), carving out seven federal states from the region. The concept of North-East was also formalised through the creation of 'North Eastern Council' in 1971. The term 'seven sisters' was coined in 1976 to create a common identity among the North-Eastern states. Sikkim was added to the list in 2002 as the eighth North-Eastern sister-state.

While the initial approach of postcolonial Indian state towards North-East was based on explicit military hard-power, the years around the liberalisation of Indian economy in 1991 saw an increasing deployment of economic soft-power, whereby the Indian state attempted to integrate the 'troubled' North-East through a visibly development-centric logic, which nonetheless implicitly continued to be deeply embedded in a security-centric approach, whereby the state poured enormous resources into North-East to remove what was seen as macro-economic factors behind political instability in the region, albeit aimed at furthering the state's political ends towards nationalizing the contentious frontier space.[19] Attempts at such integration followed the rhetoric of development-gap in the North-East, which began in the 70s, and was consolidated through formation of the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER) in 2001. More recently, the Indian state has implemented Look East Policy (2003), which was upgraded to Act East Policy (2014), whose main aim is to turn North-East into an important hub in India's engagement with South-East Asian countries, thereby transforming the region from being colonial frontier to postcolonial borderland to neoliberal gateway,[20] while maintaining the postcolonial centre-periphery power-relationship that historically existed between India and *its* North-East. However, a significant effect of economic liberalisation has come in the form of mass migration of people from the North-East (and Himalayan regions) to other parts of India, mainly cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, etc.[21] Thus, although 'race' and racism existed earlier, it is within this historical conjuncture that can be described as India's postcolonial, post-liberalisation era that racism discourse in relation to 'Northeasterns' emerged and became consolidated in the Indian public sphere.

Tracing the genealogy of 'race' in India: the problem of under-theorisation

The concept of 'race' first emerged under Western Enlightenment modernity which, propelled by the notion of rationality, sought to dissect, order and classify natural and social reality into recognisable and manageable categories, such that 'race' was

introduced as a scientific concept to the modern world.[22] This scientific conceptua-lisation of 'race' became consolidated in the 18th and 19th centuries during the era of European imperialism and colonialism, where 'race' was strategically used in the administration and legitimisation of the colonial enterprise. By linking biological features to socio-cultural traits, 'race' was understood as a form of sub-species among humans, hierarchising humanity along evolutionary lines, with white-Europeans occupying the pinnacle of this hierarchical chain.[23] Since 'race' was conceptualised along the lines of biological essentialism, the discrimination and exploitation that resulted in the form of slavery and colonial domination came to be defined as 'biological/scientific' or 'old' racism. After the end of the World Wars, the scientific validity of 'race' was dismantled, which was publicly declared by UNESCO in 1950.[24] However, the dismantling of the biological basis of 'race' did not erase racism, which now took a new form. The 20th century witnessed political decolonisation and emergence of world nation-state system, creating ethnic, indigen-ous, and other minorities within new nation states; alongside an upsurge of global migration, characterised by a uni-directional flow of people from the Global South to the Global North, who became minoritized within Western nation-states. This led to new forms of discrimination centred on immigrants and ethnic minorities, which was based not on notions of biological superiority and inferiority but on ideas of absolute cultural incompatibility. Since 'race' became defined along the lines of cultural essentialism, the discriminations that resulted came to be known as 'cultural' or 'new' racism,[25] which is the predominant form of racism existing in many parts of the world today.

In the context of India, it was British colonialism that introduced the modern concept of 'race' for the first time to the subcontinent, particularly through the theory of 'Aryan race'.[26] The 'Aryan race' theory, put forth by Orientalists and Indologists in the 18th and 19th centuries, posited that speakers of Indo-European languages like Greek, German and Sanskrit belonged to 'Aryan' master race and that due to historical-migratory factors, European Aryans became superior to Indo-Aryans.[27] Thapar states that Aryanism sig-nificantly brought the notion of biological 'race' to the forefront and, 'Aryan therefore, although specifically a label for a language, came to be used for a people and a race as well, the argument being that those who spoke the same language belonged to the same biological race'.[28] By 19th century, 'Aryan race' theory was utilised within the colonial anthropological framework, particularly in the 1901 Census of India. Headed by anthro-pologist and Census Commissioner of British India, Sir Herbert Risley, the 1901 Census systematically linked physical traits – like shape of the nose, skin colour and size of the eyes – to basic features of social stratification, thereby categorising the subcontinental population into seven racial types namely – *Turk-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian and Mongoloid.*[29] Based on this typol-ogy, the diverse population inhabiting the North-Eastern and Himalayan frontiers of British India became defined as 'yellowish' people with 'epicanthic fold' in the eyes, and were categorised as 'primitive', 'savage', 'hill and forest tribes' who belonged to the 'Mongoloid' race, distinct from caste-Hindu 'Aryans' who inhabited the plains of India. On situating this within the historical development of 'race' in the modern world, it becomes clear that the colonial categorisation of people from the North-East as 'Mongoloids' was as a part of the larger discourse of scientific 'race' that was

predominant at that time; such that 'race' in India under colonialism was conceptualised through the lens of biological essentialism.

The conceptualisation of 'race' took a different turn in the post-independence period, which was centred on 'race' vs caste debates of the 20th century. This can be situated within the emergence of caste-based subaltern politics that characterised the socio-political landscape of post-independent India. While colonial anthropologists read 'race' into caste, arguing that the caste system is an ultimate culmination of racial differences; the first generation of Indian sociologists strongly opposed such linkages, instead arguing that 'race' and caste are conceptually different, exemplified in Beteille's[30] statement, 'descent (caste) is a social category, whereas race is a biological category'. However, the conceptualisation of 'race' took a different turn during this period, which rather involved examining 'race' and caste through a comparative vantage point, weighing the Indian caste system against American race-relations, which were carried out in both India and North America. In the U.S., sociologists like Warner and Myrdal developed the caste school of race relations.,[31][32] In India, Dalit intellectuals and activists similarly drew on the black experience to articulate their struggle, most evident in the Dalit Panthers movement. Despite this, others like Cox and Gupta reminded that there are fundamental differences between 'race' and caste because unlike caste, 'race' is determined by biology.,[33][34] Based on such debates, while caste was defined as a distinct feature of Indian society and a socio-cultural system, 'race' became conceived as biological and racism as a feature of modern-Western societies, which was, while comparable, inapplicable to the Indian context.

It was however in the light of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance that took place in Durban in 2001 that the 'race' vs caste debate caught international attention, where Dalit activists sought inclusion of caste-based discrimination within global discourse on combatting racism.[35] This resulted in scholars including Beteille to vehemently oppose the inclusion of caste within Durban's definition of racism, putting forth the 'caste is not race' viewpoint that resonated in the aftermath of Durban.[36] Others like Omvedt however endorsed the viewpoint that it is correct to condemn caste as a form of racism.[37] This resulted in a 'Durban turn' in caste scholarship, which developed 'critical caste theory' that draws from 'critical race theory', thereby positioning caste within global discourse of 'race', inequality and power.[38] However, while the 'Durban turn' largely contributed to the development of caste scholarship, 'race' was still analysed only in relation to caste and not independent of it, such that 'race' and racism were still under-theorised in the Indian context. Furthermore, with India being mostly an out-migration country in the post-war/ post-independence years, the limited understanding of racism that percolated in the Indian public sphere was based on the Western-immigration model, where racism was seen as something that Indians experience when they migrate to the West rather than something that could occur within India itself.

The 21st century witnessed a gradual shift in the understanding of racism, which centred not on 'race' vs caste debates, but on experiences of minorities from North-East and Himalayan regions, collectively referred to as 'Northeasterns' – which I term as 'new racism studies'. 'New racism studies' can be situated within the postcolonial, post-liberalisation context, where rise in migration from the North-Eastern and Himalayan regions to urban centres in Indian 'mainland' witnessed a corresponding rise in

discrimination against 'Northeastern' migrants. 'New racism studies' explores different facets of racism against 'Northeasterns', including factors behind migration and forms of discrimination,[39] contentions in relation to Indian citizenship as well as minority practices of negotiations against racism, and some have also put forth an argument towards implementation of anti-racism laws in India.,[40],[41][42] 'New racism studies' has made key contributions in examining racism in India as it marks a break from previous understandings of 'race' since it not only untangles 'race' from caste, but also creates a new space to discuss racism as experienced by racialized minorities within India itself, thereby re-positioning and addressing racism as a problem internal to contemporary India.

However, while 'new racism studies' presents important empirical work on the embodied and emplaced experiences of racism in India, particularly in the cities, there still remains a theoretical gap in the understanding of 'race' and racism in contemporary Indian context. In other words, while these works have examined experiences of racism in India, the concept of 'race' itself, which structures manifestations of racisms, remains largely unexamined in the Indian context, such that 'race' and racism in India still remains largely under-theorised. Thus, without discrediting 'new racism studies' but rather to expand its boundaries, I argue that the problem of under-theorisation of 'race' and racism in the Indian context can be addressed by adopting the racialization approach.

Re-framing 'race' and racism in India: the racialization approach

At the heart of critical 'race' scholarship is the ontological-epistemological position of constructivism-interpretivism that is based on a non-essentialist understanding of social reality, and therefore views 'race' not as a biological fact but a social construct.[43] As a social construct, 'race' can be understood as an organising principle of modern societies, which involves homogenisation and categorisation of otherwise diverse population into distinct imagined groupings.[44] 'Race' involves biologisation of the social and social signification of the biological, where the choice of criterion for the construction of difference and the meanings ascribed to them – ranging from skin colour, size of eyes, genes to geography – is certainly social.[45]

'Race' can be described as a 'floating signifier'[46] or an 'empty concept',[47] implying that 'race' carries no inherent universal meaning, but rather its meaning is derived from historical and contemporary epistemological conditions, and changes depending on historically, politically, culturally and geographically specific contexts, in turn constructing differences. 'Race' as a mode of categorisation is further often used for political ends in the process of administration, governance and control of racialized social categories in a given context. If 'race' is a social and political construct, then racism can be understood as the discriminatory and exclusionary social phenomenon that emanates from the prevailing concept of 'race'. Racism can be defined as a three-fold phenomenon that involves a.) an *ideology* that hierarchises differences that informs b.) *practices* of discrimination, inclusion and exclusion, both of which are inherently based on c.) *unequal power-relations*.[48] Racism operates at multiple levels of the individual, institutional and structural that may range from acts of subtle, everyday micro-aggressions to institutional discrimination to structural inequalities.

Critical 'race' scholarship has, in the past few decades, deployed the concept of racialization within its analytical framework. If 'race' is a social construct, then racialization can be defined as the *process* through which 'races' are socially constructed and made meaningful in a given context.[49] Historically, Fanon[50] defined racialization as a process of objectification and dehumanisation of the colonised by the colonisers, which was naturalised through signification of the biological features (e.g. skin colour) that legitimised colonial domination. Racialization as a sociological concept was developed by Banton who also linked it to colonial encounter and conceptualised it as the process of social categorisation of colonised, which was made meaningful through physical differences.[51] On a similar note, Omi and Winant defined racial formation (similar to racialization) as those socio-historical processes by which racial identities are created, transformed as well as dismantled.[52] It is this racialization approach that, I argue, is an appropriate theoretical-conceptual lens in re-framing 'race' and racism in contemporary India, particularly in relation to the 'Northeastern' category. This has also been argued by Bora who states that 'racial formation', a concept similar to racialization, represents an apt tool for theorising 'race' in the Indian context.[53]

The concept of racialization is useful in many ways. Racialization allows the examination of intersectionality of 'race' with other modes of differentiation like gender, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, and nation.[54] Racialization allows multi-level analysis of 'race' and racism operating across the micro-individual, meso-institutional and macro-structural levels.[55] Racialization allows one to transcend the static binary between racist vs non-racist, rather focussing on the dynamic processes and practices that may not necessarily be racist but may yet reproduce racial meanings and practices.[56] Most importantly, racialization shifts the focus from bounded racial groups to 'race'-making process, which avoids the problems of reification, thereby unravelling the socially constructed nature of 'race' itself. While racialization has faced criticisms mainly for being vague, ambiguous[57] and lacking precision,[58] one of its key strengths is its contextual specificity and sensitivity, which allows one to examine how 'race' and racism operate in diverse socio-cultural, historical and geographic contexts, including that of contemporary India.

From colonial 'Mongoloid' to neoliberal 'Northeastern': Theorising 'race', racialization and racism in the Indian context

Having argued that 'race' in India remains largely under-theorised, this section of the paper utilises the aforementioned racialization framework and provides theoretical insights into 'race' and racism in relation to the 'Northeastern' category in contemporary India. This section draws from empirical material gathered through an eight-month-long ethnographic research in the city of Delhi involving participant observation and in-depth qualitative interviews among 40 participants. Out of the total, 24 were men and 16 were women, aged between 18 and 40, who were from different parts of the North-East and Himalayan regions, living in Delhi. Among the participants, 21 were university students, 2 were unemployed, 6 were service sector workers, 11 were self-employed and ran small ethnic and cultural enterprises in neighbourhoods like Safdarjung with significant 'Northeastern' population. Furthermore, hailing from the Eastern Himalayan and North-Eastern state of Sikkim myself and living between Gangtok, Delhi and the UK, my positionality in the field as a postcolonial subjectivity blurred boundaries of 'insider' vs 'outsider' perspectives, which gave unique critical and analytical perspective to this

research. The data thus gathered have been thematically analysed in the form of the following four-fold arguments.

'Mongoloid', 'chinky', 'northeastern': 'race' as a postcolonial-neoliberal construct

On closely examining the 'Northeastern' category, it can be argued that while it became articulated to refer to people from the North-East and Himalayan regions in the last decade, it is in reality a complex historical construction that originated under British colonialism and developed through the postcolonial and post-liberalisation periods. It was initially under the colonial regime that the epistemology of 'race' was introduced to the Indian subcontinent, which was used to racialize the people of the Himalayan and North-Eastern frontier region through the category of 'Mongoloid', which was derived from the predominant biological or scientific notion of 'race' of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the process, the colonial regime constructed a primordial link between 'race' – the 'Mongoloid' and space – the North-East (and Himalayas), which racialized the borderland region and the population therein. Although such biologically essentialist basis of 'race' is now invalidated, it was found that the colonial bio-anthropological notion of 'race' still holds significance in the racialization process, such that the colonial 'Mongoloid' can be seen as the direct epistemological ancestor of the contemporary 'Northeastern' category. This was illustrated by Mingma (27, M) from Darjeeling, who is a postgraduate student and activist in Delhi,

> My dominant identity in Delhi is obviously that I am seen as a 'Northeastern' which means that typically, my 'Mongoloid' identity based on my features is highlighted. I sometimes feel like I am reduced to my biology.

Through the racialization perspective, Mingma's statement shows the direct linkage between the 'Mongoloid' and 'Northeastern' categories, thereby not only highlighting the ongoing, processual and socially constructed nature of 'race' in India; but also unveiling the persistent biological essentialism in the manifestation of racism against 'Northeasterns' today.

Although 'race' was constructed under British colonialism as a socio-political category of administration and governance, it developed through the post-independence years where the postcolonial Indian state continued to implicitly and sometimes explicitly maintain the 'race'-space link in the administration of postcolonial North-East, most evident in Sardar Patel, the Home Minister of India's infamous 'Mongoloid alarm', where he termed political claims of the indigenous ethno-nationalist groups in the region as 'pro-Mongoloid prejudice'.[59] This also reflects how historically racialization has often involved securitization, where racialized minorities are constructed as security threats to the state. Furthermore, if 'race' involves categorisation and homogenisation of diverse populations through biological, cultural and geographical signification particularly for governance, then the state-led fomalisation of the concept of 'North-East' through creation of institutions like North-Eastern Council, as well as the informal use of homogenising terms such as 'eight sisters', reflects state-led structural racialization and feminisation of the North-East region and its diverse people.[60]

However, while 'race' in relation to the 'Northeastern' category developed in the postcolonial, post-independent period, it was in the post-liberalisation era that

racialization of 'Northeastern' category became consolidated. With the liberalisation of economy in 1991, Indian cities like Delhi became the centre-stage of India's neoliberal modernizing project, facilitating migration from the North-Eastern and Himalayan regions to these urban centres. While movement of people from the North-East to 'mainland' cities like Delhi existed prior to liberalisation, it was mainly the well-educated elites of the region who moved to Indian urban centres in a much smaller scale in the post-independence period. However, post-liberalisation migration not only marked a change in terms of increase in scale but also in terms of diversification of the new migrant population, who now belonged to much diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including those who are less educated and unemployed in their home states.[61]

Such increased migration disrupted the primordial 'race'-space link, facilitating encounter between people who were historically classified under different racialized categories, highlighting the centrality of neoliberalism-driven processes of migration, urbanism and labour market formation in the racialization of 'Northeasterns'. This encounter harboured the need for the construction of a new racialized terminology or label to refer to these new migrants in the cities. As such, the initial phase of this encounter witnessed the use of a terminology – 'Chinki', which soon became discarded as a racial slur.[62] However, the termination of the term 'chinki' did not mean annihilation of 'race' or experiences of racism, which required another terminology to denote itself that was not racist yet racialized, thereby giving rise to the contemporary term – 'Northeastern'. This was explained by Rajesh (30, M), who is from Manipur and owns a small business in Delhi,

> The word 'Northeastern' is just an alternative . . . we are the first generation who have come till Delhi and have started living in big cities. People don't even know where North-East is, so they generalised us by saying, 'oh these people, they all look the same, they're all 'chinkies'' . . . But today rather than saying 'chinki', they say 'Northeastern' and we think, 'okay! At least he respected me'.

This shift in terminology from 'Mongoloid' to 'Chinki' to 'Northeastern' (still used synonymously) provides insights into the workings of 'race' in the Indian context. Firstly, it shows that rather than being an ontologically fixed biological category, 'race' is a socio-historical construct and in the context of India, it is a construct of colonial, postcolonial and post-liberalisation conditions, such that 'Northeastern' itself is a racialized postcolonial-neoliberal construct. This is not to say that the construction of the 'Northeastern' category followed a linear historical trajectory, but rather to highlight the complexities, nuances and historicity of processes of racialization that led to the construction of the contemporary 'Northeastern' category. Further, the changing racialized terminology suggests that far from being static and ahistorical, 'race' in India is indeed a 'floating signifier'[63] – a fluid, transforming and adaptive concept that assumes significance depending on the prevailing social and epistemological conditions as well as bearing traces of past significations. Thus, this suggests that 'race' is a central concept of modernity and is transformed as modernity in India itself is renewed, refined and redefined, which (re)produces new racialized subjectivities such as colonial 'Mongoloids' and postcolonial-neoliberal 'Northeasterns'.[64]

Becoming 'northeastern': racialization as a mode of constructing identity and difference

'Race' alongside gender, class, caste, ethnicity, nationality, etc., functions as an axis of a complex system of identification and differentiation, such that narratives of self and other are often dependent on processes of racialization.[65] On examining the 'Northeastern' category, it was found that while historically the 'Northeastern' was never a social group but a geo-political and administrative concept, with migration to 'mainland' in contemporary postcolonial-neoliberal times, it is increasingly becoming racialized and articulated as a social group bearing shared identity. This was expressed by Leon (19, M), who is from Manipur and an undergraduate student at Delhi University. Recalling his experience of moving to Delhi for education, Leon stated,

> When I first came to Delhi, I knew people from Manipur, who never talked to me before, but after coming here, they started talking to me. They wanted to group together since we are a minority here. That was how I realised I am a Northeastern.

Leon's statement shows that the 'Northeastern' as an identity category does not exist in the North-East and Himalayan regions itself where the dominant modes of identifications are based on one's ethno-tribal affiliations, such that the identity of 'Northeastern' is only materialised and located in relation to the 'mainland', particularly as a result of migration and marginalisation. Further, although it appears that the racialized 'Northeastern' identity tends to homogenise the diversity of people from different parts of the North-East and Himalayan regions, it was found that the 'Northeastern' is a deeply layered identity, such that the ethno-tribal associations continue to persist and are invoked depending on the context and its audience.[66] This can be referred to as 'layering' of racialized identities, where 'Northeastern' as a mode of identification is highly contextual and situational, such that a person may continue to identify themselves at the indigenous/tribal (eg. Tangkhul, Sumi), ethnic (eg. Nepali, Naga, Meitei), regional/territorial (eg. Manipuri, Sikkimese) and racialized ('Northeastern') levels depending on strategic utility, symbolic appropriateness and social setting of a given interaction. This further reveals the potentiality of ethno-tribal and cultural identities to open up to racialized reinvention and reconstruction, showing how racialized identities such as the 'Northeastern' are unstable, fragmented yet flexible.

Furthermore, it was found that the 'Northeastern' identity is constructed through a two-way process of external racialization by the majority as well as internal self-racialization by minorities themselves. On the one hand, external racialization involves reading the bodies and phenotype of the racialized minorities as a signifier in constructing difference from the majority and thereby homogenising, categorising and 'othering' them as 'Northeasterns'. It is due to this external racialization that people who are not technically from the North-East region but who fall under the colonial 'Mongoloid' category, such as those from Ladakh or even neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bhutan become externally identified and racialized as 'Northeasterns'. In the same vein, it is due to external racialization that people technically from the North-East but who do not fall under the colonial 'Mongoloid' category (like some from Assam for instance) do not become racialized and are not perceived as a 'Northeasterns' and therefore do not

face the same forms or extent of racism, further highlighting the unstable and alienable character of racialized identities like 'Northeastern'.

On the other hand, internal self-racialization involves minorities themselves constructing a shared sense of identity, which also includes a similar process of homogenisation, categorisation and signification of phenotypical and cultural factors. However, unlike external racialization, self-racialization is directed towards resisting or negotiating with racism and discrimination, which itself is born out of their minority status. This has resulted in a formation of a 'Northeastern' *community* in cities like Delhi, which was exemplified in the statement made Mimo (28, F) who is from Manipur but now settled in Delhi,

> *'Delhi is like our second home because there is such a huge number of 'Northeastern' community here now'.*

Thus, the emergence of the racialized 'Northeastern' identity and community shows that 'race' in contemporary India, alongside caste, gender, class, etc., acts as an axis of constructing identity and difference, albeit in a layered manner, where the process of racialization informs identity formation, further shaping contemporary identity politics.

'Northeastern' vis-à-vis 'Indian': racialization as central to imagining the nation

Racism in the context of 'Northeasterns' is almost always experienced and articulated in relation to the Indian nation. This is firstly evident in the fact that people from the North-East and Himalayan regions are often perceived and misrecognised as non-citizens, in both cultural and phenotypical sense, and are labelled as Chinese or Nepalese (keeping in mind that there are ethnic Nepali Indians).[67] Additionally, the racialized 'Northeastern' identity category does not exist in isolation but is always relational to the category of 'Indian'. This was expressed clearly by Fiona (32, F) from Nagaland who runs a small enterprise in Delhi,

> *If we want all this (racism) to stop, then we have to stop calling ourselves 'Northeasterns' and start calling ourselves 'Indians', because there is a difference– when you say you're a 'Northeastern', then you're saying that you are different.*

Thus, it is clear that the racialized 'Northeastern' category is always invoked, explicitly and implicitly, within the framework of the postcolonial Indian nation, which requires examining the relationship between 'race' and nation specific to the Indian context.

Following Anderson,[68] nations are imagined communities, implying that they are not natural or primordial entities but are rather modern socio-political constructs, whereby 'race' may act as an active ingredient in the process of imagining the nation. In other words, since both 'race' and nation are social and political constructs invented simultaneously by modernity, they are intrinsically linked and share a symbiotic relationship, where 'race' provides nation with a cohesive identity that can be stretched across time and space; and nation acts as a language in articulating 'race' and racism.[69] In the context of India, it was found that far from being neutral, the 'Indian' category is indeed a racialized construct, most commonly defined through the dominant socio-cultural norm that can be described as being upper-caste, Hindi-speaking, Hindu particularly of the North Indian region. It is this group who have historically been racialized through the

colonial category of 'Indo-Aryans', such that the further one deviates from the norm, the lesser citizen they become.[70] This is evident in the rise of Hindu nationalism, which has been increasingly laying exclusive claims to the postcolonial nation by excluding minorities like Muslims and Dalits from claiming equal status.[71] Since people from the North-Eastern and Himalayan regions have historically always remained outside this dominant socio-cultural norm of the nation, they are therefore racialized as 'Northeasterns' who may be formal citizens, but aliens in the socio-cultural sense. This was expressed by Jimmy (20, M), who is an undergraduate student from Assam living in Delhi,

> Being an Indian means to have been born in India right. I have taken birth in India so personally I like to identify myself as an Indian. But, in certain respect, in cultural terms, I'm not sure if I can call myself an Indian, because there are certain differences, because I belong to the Northeast.

Thus, I argue that not only are the 'Northeasterns' excluded from the normative Indian nation, but that the very construction of the 'Northeastern' category is a result of the racialized underpinning of the postcolonial Indian nation, suggesting that 'race' and racialization are central to imagining and discursively constructing modern Indian nation and in shaping exclusionary nationalisms.

Othering 'Northeasterns': internal racism and centre-periphery power relation

Racism as a social phenomenon is ultimately about power and in the context of 'Northeasterns', this can be explained through the notion of centre-periphery power-relationship. Centre-periphery can be understood as a postcolonial form of power-relation where the centre is the physical or discursive space where power is concentrated, and periphery is that which exists in its marginality, upon which power is exercised.[72] Furthermore, it should be understood that the very notion of periphery itself is constructed from the centre, such that the latter not only has political and economic but also epistemological power over the former. In the context of India and its North-East, Baruah[73] rightly argues that historical relationship between the two has been characterised by centre-periphery power-dynamics, where the North-East is constructed and suspended as the periphery of the postcolonial Indian nation-state, such that the concept of North-East itself is constructed from the directional and epistemological viewpoint of the Indian centre. In the context of 'Northeasterns' in contemporary India, it can be argued that rather than disrupting it, post-liberalisation migration from North-Eastern and Himalayan peripheries to neoliberal urban centres reproduces this centre-periphery power dynamics, which manifests in the form of racism at individual, institutional and structural levels.

At the individual level, racism against 'Northeasterns' particularly in 'mainland' urban centres comes in many forms. McDuie-Ra argues that these discriminatory practices range from racial slurs like 'Chinki' to cultural policing to acts of explicit violence.[74] Similarly, Wouters and Subba have argued that discrimination and exclusion often manifest in the form of non-recognition or misrecognition of citizenship, where they are perceived as foreigners, which works to withhold equal citizenship status.[75] From an intersectional perspective, scholars like Mc Duie-Ra and Bora argue that racism is also highly gendered and classed.[76][77] While 'Northeastern' men are

stereotyped as being 'alcoholic' or 'potentially violent', women are seen as 'promiscuous' and 'sexually available', which results in differential racialized and gendered experiences for them. Additionally, they are also often perceived in a classed manner as 'service providers' due to their highly visible presence in the service-sector oriented labour market, which adds nuance to their experiences of racialization and racism.

Racism at the institutional level can occur across various institutions such as universities, labour market institutions and at workplace, or within the cultural and economic industries of the cities. An example of institutional racism within the service sector industry of Delhi's neoliberal economy, which employs a significant number of 'Northeasterns', can be found in Ritu's (38, F) anecdote, who is from Kalimpong and works as a receptionist in a luxury Hotel,

> *'At work, it's very difficult for us to be promoted to the position of Manager. Even now, even today, we don't get promoted to managerial positions. We need to fight to move ahead. Ask anyone. Ask people working at call-centres. Everyone. Men and women. Others get promoted but they don't promote us'.*

Ritu's statement shows institutional barriers that people racialized as 'Northeasterns' may face, which reflects the reproduction of unequal power relations in everyday contexts that may be implicit and indirect but perpetuates discrimination. Furthermore, structural racism may come in the form of discriminatory ideologies and practices that maintains racialized inequalities and unequal power-relations across institutions and at the systemic level.

Following Balibar,[78] racism experienced by 'Northeasterns' in contemporary India can be seen as a form of internal racism, which is directed towards unassimilable racialized minorities within the nation who are still legally citizens; as opposed to external racism, which is xenophobic in nature and directed towards non-citizens. This is reflected in Meghna's (23, F) statement, who is a postgraduate student at Delhi University from Darjeeling.

> *Like when I first went to college, I interacted with everyone. And they said to me, 'You are the first 'Northeastern' girl who is getting along with 'normal' Indians'. But what did he mean by 'normal' and 'abnormal' Indian?*

Meghna's account further shows how internal racism reproduces the centre-periphery power-relationship, which leads to the 'othering' of people racialized as 'Northeasterns' in the most mundane, everyday micro-interactions. Overall, the arguments presented here suggest that racism is in contemporary India in relation to the 'Northeastern' category is complex and multiple, and may exist simultaneously at the individual, institutional and structural levels, further reiterating the need to theorise 'race' and racism in the Indian context, which can be explored through the multi-level racialization approach advocated in this paper.

Conclusion: developing critical 'race' scholarship in India

The conclusion of this paper once again returns to Dibya's question,

> *We know that there is racism here, but how do we understand the meaning of race in India?*

This provocation is precisely a question of theorising 'race' and racism in contemporary Indian context. To answer this, the paper explored the relationship between India and *its* North-East and traced the genealogy of the concept of 'race' in India, showing that while 'race' and racism have emerged as a theoretical-political problem of contemporary India particularly in relation to the 'Northeastern' category; these concepts remain largely under-theorised in the Indian context. Then, drawing from my ethnographic research among 'Northeasterns' in Delhi, and applying the racialization approach, this paper answered Dibya's question through four-fold arguments.

Firstly, by examining the shifting racialized terminologies from 'Mongoloid' to 'Chinki' to 'Northeastern', this paper argues that 'race' in India is a socio-historical construct, which is a product of colonial, postcolonial and post-liberalisation modernities, such that the 'Northeastern' itself is a postcolonial-neoliberal construct. Secondly, by examining the ways in which the 'Northeastern' identity is constructed through processes of racialization, this paper argues that 'race' in India (alongside caste, class, gender, etc.) acts as a mode of constructing identity and difference, albeit in a layered manner, which further results in differential experiences and exclusions. Thirdly, this paper examined the relationship between 'race' and Indian nation, arguing that the 'Indian' category itself is racialized along Hinduised-Aryanised lines; such that not only are the 'Northeasterns' excluded from the normative Indian nation, but the very construction of the 'Northeastern' category is a result of this racialized underpinning of the postcolonial Indian nation. Finally, this paper argues that racism against 'Northeasterns' operates through and is sustained by the postcolonial centre-periphery power relation, which can be seen as a form of internal racism.

In terms of its theoretical and socio-political implications, this paper ultimately aims to contribute to the development of critical 'race' scholarship in the Indian context. On the one hand, while 'race' and racism have been under-theorised within Indian scholarship, there is an emergent 'new racism studies' that examines racism in the context of 'Northeasterns' in India, which is nonetheless still in its early stages. On the other hand, critical 'race' scholarship, which broadly encompasses the vast body of inter-disciplinary work that engages with questions of 'race' and racism across the globe, has immensely contributed to the theorisation and understanding of 'race' and racism in the modern world. However, critical 'race' scholarship tends to be mostly centred on Western, Global North societies, remaining mostly silent on questions of 'race' and racism in non-Western, Global South contexts like that of contemporary India.

Thus, by theorising 'race' and racism in the Indian context, this paper contributes to the development of the emergent critical 'race' scholarship in the Indian context, which could be further explored and applied to other pressing issues in regard to 'race' and racism in contemporary Indian context, including but not limited to 'race' vs caste debates, Islamophobia and Hindutva, colourism and racialized differences between North Indians and South Indians, Siddis and African migrants in India, Anglo Indians and other diaspora communities in the Indian subcontinent. This paper also contributes to the development of new concepts within critical race theory such as multiple racializations and global raciality,[79] which examine how 'race', racialization and racism function in today's globalised, postcolonial and neoliberal world order.[80]

Notes

1. This paper uses the term 'race' and 'Northeastern' within quotation marks to imply their socially constructed nature rather than denote their ontologically fixed status.
2. Rai, 'Beyond The Language Of Colour, Through The Lens Of "Race".'
3. Parameswaran and Cardoza, 'Melanin On The Margins: Advertising And The Cultural Politics Of Fair/Light/White Beauty In India.'
4. Baber, '"Race", Religion And Riots: The "Racialization" Of Communal Identity And Conflict In India.'
5. Paola, Maira, and Winant. (2019). *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality And Decoloniality.*
6. Baruah, *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking The Impasse In North-East India.*
7. Wouters and Subba, 'The "Indian Face," India's Northeast, And "The Idea Of India".'
8. The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) classified by the Government of India includes the states of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir like Ladakh, hill districts of West Bengal like Darjeeling, and the North-Eastern states (Smith and Gergan 2015). This paper uses the term Himalayan informally to refer to individuals from these regions who are not from the North-East but are racialized as 'Northeasterns' in Delhi.
9. McDuie-Ra, *Debating Race In Contemporary India.*
10. Haokip, 'From "Chinky" To "Coronavirus": Racism Against Northeast Indians During The Covid-19 Pandemic.'
11. Bora, 'The Problem Without A Name: Comments On Cultural Difference (Racism) In India.'
12. Syiemlieh, *On The Edge Of Empire: Four British Plans For North East India, 1941–1947.*
13. Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier Of India.*
14. Haokip, 'Conceptualising Northeast India: A Discursive Analysis On Diversity.'
15. Kikon, 'From Loincloth Suits To Battle Greens.'
16. Bora, 'Between The Human, The Citizen And The Tribal.'
17. Baruah, *In The Name Of The Nation: India And Its North-East.* Baruah conceptualises the power dynamics between India and its North-East through the centre-periphery metaphor.
18. Choudhury, 'State In India's North-East: Where Is The State?.'
19. Baruah, 'Nationalizing Space: Cosmetic Federalism And The Politics Of Development In Northeast India'.
20. Haokip, *India's Look East Policy And The Northeast.*
21. McDuie-Ra, 'Beyond The "Exclusionary City": North-East Migrants In Neo-Liberal Delhi.'
22. Alexander and Knowles, *Making Race Matter.*
23. Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction.*
24. The Human Genome Project that started in the 1990s also concluded its findings in 2000 stating that the biological basis of 'race' is reductive and pseudo-scientific (McCann-Mortimer 2004).
25. Balibar, 'Is There A "Neo-Racism"?.'
26. While some may argue that there exist pre-colonial conceptions of 'race' in India such as the Kiratas of classic Sanskrit literature, this is a debatable hypothesis. Since 'race' as a modern concept not only involves social categorisation through biological and/or cultural signification, but more importantly is characterised by its political function of management and governance of these social categories to maintain unequal power-relations, in the context of India, such a socio-political conception of 'race' was indeed introduced by the British colonial regime. However, if there does exist a pre-colonial conception of 'race', which may have racialized socio-political implications in modern, postcolonial context, then the racialization approach would be a useful way to examine this, which further highlights the need theorise the complexities and layers of 'race' and racism in the Indian context.
27. Mahmud, 'Colonialism and modern constructions of race'.
28. Thapar, 'The Theory Of Aryan Race And India: History And Politics', 6.

29. Risley, *The People Of India*. Risley's racial classification is a classic example of colonial racialization.
30. Beteille, Andre. 'Race and descent as social categories in India', 454.
31. Warner, 'American Caste And Class.'
32. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem And Modern Democracy.*
33. Cox, *Caste, Class, And Race.*
34. Gupta, 'Caste, Race, Politics.'
35. Natrajan and Greenough, *Against Stigma: Studies In Caste, Race And Justice Since Durban.*
36. Beteille, 'Race And Caste.'
37. Omvedt, 'Hindutva And Ethnicity.'
38. Das, '"Is Caste Race?" Discourses Of Racial Indianization.'
39. McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants In Delhi: Race, Refuge And Retail.*
40. See above 7.
41. Smith and Gergan, 'The Diaspora Within: Himalayan Youth, Education-Driven Migration, And Future Aspirations In India.'
42. See above 10.
43. Golash-Boza, 'A Critical And Comprehensive Sociological Theory Of Race And Racism.'
44. Garner, *Racisms.*
45. Murji and Solomos, *Racialization: Studies In Theory And Practice.*
46. Hall, *Race, The Floating Signifier*. Hall's conceptualisation of 'race' as a floating signifier has been widely used in contemporary critical 'race' scholarship.
47. Goldberg, *Racist Culture.*
48. See above 43.
49. Gans, 'Racialization And Racialization Research.'
50. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks.*
51. Banton, *The Idea Of Race.*
52. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation In The United States: From The 1960S To The 1990S.*
53. Bora, 'The Problem Without A Name: Comments On Cultural Difference (Racism) In India.' Bora advocates Omi and Winant's concept of 'racial formation' to examine racism in India, which is very similar to racialization.
54. Anthias and Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour And Class And The Anti-Racist Struggle.*
55. Phillips, 'Institutional Racism And Ethnic Inequalities: An Expanded Multilevel Framework.'
56. Song, 'Challenging A Culture Of Racial Equivalence.'
57. Barot and Bird, 'Racialization: The Genealogy And Critique Of A Concept.'
58. Goldberg, *Sites Of Race.*
59. Wouters and Subba, "The 'Indian Face,' India's Northeast, And 'The Idea Of India'.
60. Garner (2010). *Racisms*: An Introduction.
61. See above 39.
62. Saxena, Kashika. (2012). 'Call A Northeastern "Chinki", Be Jailed For 5 Yrs – Times Of India'. *The Times Of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/spotlight/Call-a-Northeastern-Chinki-be-jailed-for-5-yrs/articleshow/13,848,316.cms.
63. Hall, *Race, The Floating Signifier.*
64. See above 47.
65. Anthias, 'Race And Class Revisited – Conceptualising Race And Racisms.'
66. McBeth, 'Layered Identity Systems In Western Oklahoma Indian Communities.'
67. See above 7.
68. Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*
69. See above 25.
70. Ramaswamy, 'Visualising India's Geo-Body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes.' Through the discursive map of India, Ramaswamy vividly explains the Hinduisation-Aryanisation of India as an imagined nation.
71. Jayal, *Citizenship And Its Discontents.*

72. Mignolo, 'DELINKING.'
73. Baruah, *In The Name Of The Nation: India And Its North-East.*
74. See above 39.
75. See above 7.
76. See above 39.
77. Bora, 'The Problem Without A Name: Comments On Cultural Difference (Racism) In India.'
78. Balibar, "Is There A 'Neo-Racism?'
79. Bonnett, "Multiple racializations in a multiply modern world.
80. Bacchetta et al. (2019). *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality And Decoloniality.*

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