

## Inter-Group Perception and Experience: Exploration in the Lives of Northeasterners (NE) in India

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### ABSTRACT

Over the years, the importance of historically neglected North East (NE) India has gained momentum. Previous studies in Psychology have focused either on identity of NE people, migration, acculturation or prejudice. Research on perception of NE (Indian) people by non-NE people (Indian) and vice-versa has been scanty. The present study attempts to understand perception of Northeast (NE) students of India by non-NE students (primarily North Indian/NI students staying in Delhi) using a sentence completion task. Participants consisted of female college students and research scholars; (N=30, mean age = 20.8 years). The study also takes into account the rising cases of racism against NE people in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results from the empirical study indicate a general and superficial understanding of NE by non-NE participants. Findings are overall positive, showing that educated and aware student community do not explicitly view NE through the lens of stereotype and prejudice. Yet subtle biases were present. On the contrary, a number of news reports point towards the incidences of prejudice and discrimination against NE people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The secondary data analysis clearly indicates the level of dehumanisation and discrimination that NE people are experiencing. Thus the study calls for more attention of researchers to dive deeper into these opposite trends and bring out the subtle forms of misperceptions to bridge the gulf between NE people and non-NE people. Results indicate that perhaps positive changes are happening only at explicit level, and at implicit level people still harbour negative perceptions and attitudes, which manifests during times of crisis. The findings have been explained with the help of Terror Management Theory.

**Keywords:** Perception; Northeast; Prejudice; Discrimination; Terror management theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Perception in general is how one person sees another, forms an impression or a judgement about another in any social context. In the current global scenario, where there is ever increasing contact between different groups of people, understanding the role of perception in everyday life is of paramount importance. It is exemplified by the number of research conducted especially on related and pervasive areas like contact hypothesis, attribution, impression formation, and intergroup relations<sup>1-3</sup>. Some central aspects of perception involve understanding the role of non-verbal cues, attribution processes and impression formation to mention a few. Classic theories on “correspondent inference”<sup>4</sup> to “Casual attribution”<sup>5</sup> to myriads of present day studies on perception in the context of inter-group relations has evolved including various innovative, nonconventional techniques to measure such concepts. Some of the novel techniques include using Implicit Association Task<sup>2</sup>, response latency procedures after priming<sup>6</sup> etc. In recent times many study have employed implicit techniques to measure a wide range of topics including attitude, stereotype, self-esteem and perception etc.

This whole process of perception demands an understanding on inter-group relations. There are various theories ranging from Social Identity Theory<sup>7</sup> in which a person derive his/her social identity based on their membership of a group. Minimal group paradigm shows that even mere classification of people into any random groups can inflate in-group/out-group differentiation. Then Relative Deprivation theory highlights group members feeling a sense of deprivation when compared to more privilege others. Another theory of relative importance in this context is a Five Stage Model of Inter-Group Relation by Taylor & Mckirnan<sup>8</sup>. As the name suggests they give five stage in which the whole inter-group processes goes through starting from clearly stratifying based on group membership in stage one to stratifying based on individual achievement in stage two, to consciousness raising based on the success or failure in the above stages to finally set for collective action.

### 2. ERRORS/BIASES IN PERCEPTION

Associates with these social perception does comes certain errors/biases in perception. Such biases could be cognitive (stereotyping), attitudinal (prejudice) or behavioural (discrimination)<sup>9,10</sup>. The cognitive component i.e. stereotype is the positive or negative beliefs about a social group.

Often stereotypes are oversimplified generalisations about certain people or things, whereas the attitudinal component i.e. prejudice is an unjustified negative attitude towards a member of an out-group which is often a prejudgement. And the behavioural component i.e. discrimination is the unfair treatment towards the out-group members. Some of them can be towards an individual while others can be towards any group. Few prominent and relevant biases are:

- Fundamental attribution error/correspondence bias: tendency to explain others action/behaviour as a result of disposition even where clear signs of situational causes exist.
- Actor Observer Effect: tendency of those acting in a situation to blame their actions on the situation, while those observing have the tendency to place the blame on the actors.
- In-group bias: tendency to favour own group members and their actions over outsiders.
- Halo effect: Another common perceptual error people usually commit is Halo effect, tendency for overall impression of an individual to affect the observer's feelings and thoughts about other attributes/traits of the individual.
- Status quo bias: tendency to favor current or certain circumstances because they are familiar.

There are numerous other biases which are out of scope for the present study. These kind of errors in perception can be improved upon and closely aligned with the ground reality.

### 3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Various attempts has been done to bridge and bring integration especially in inter-group relations. Study on Contact Hypothesis is also an attempt to understand ways and means to bring different sections of society together, bridging the gap that exist in inter-group situations<sup>11, 1</sup>. Results on contact hypothesis has shown positive signs for intergroup relations. Other attempts include re-categorisation and cross categorisation studies to reduce category salience and making people feel more connected. Intergroup cooperation and setting superordinate goal has also shown improvement in intergroup relations since early times as shown by the social experiments conducted by Sherif since 1960's. Despite increasing contact between migrant and non-migrant residents in a study in Berlin, it has reported unsuccessful in providing opportunities for deeper contact. Yet the same study reported sustained encounters engender more empathy and positive attitudes toward individual immigrants<sup>12</sup>.

Other works on perception includes Perceptual Model of Intergroup Relations (PMIR)<sup>13</sup> which integrates psychology with neuroscience, considering the fluidity of self at the heart of it. It implies that a perceiver can have different perception of same thing depending on his/her current definition of "self". Thus highlighting the practical importance in many social situations involving judgement based on bias perception induced by the identity position one takes.

A study in India found that children from Hindu and

Muslim groups generally preferred their own group member and expressed a biased attitude towards other group members<sup>14</sup>. Another study on intergroup perception on immigrants in New Zealand shows less contact, greater perceived threat and predicted more negative out-group attitude<sup>15</sup>. Superiority hypothesis suggest out-group homogeneity and ethnocentrism effects as more pronounced for higher status people than low status groups as holds by the superiority hypothesis. And inferiority hypothesis predicts the opposite<sup>16</sup>.

### 4. PRESENT STUDY AND ITS OBJECTIVE

The present study was conducted in Delhi—which is known for it's a multicultural and multi-racial environment. For decades, people of Northeast (NE) India migrate to Delhi for pursuing higher studies and better job opportunities. NE people who belong to the Mongoloid race have been reported to face various problems while staying out of the NE region. Besides formal studies, news media too reported on certain happenings related to NE because of the raising awareness and concern. Studies by noted researcher have clearly portrayed racial discrimination, prejudices or the identity conflict faced by NE people<sup>17-19</sup>.

In this context, objective of study-1 is understanding the perception of non-NE (Indian) people towards Northeast (NE) (Indian) using a sentence completion task. Study-2 analysed secondary data sources (primarily news reports) regarding the increasing cases of prejudice and racism against the people of NE during the COVID pandemic.

### 5. STUDY 1: PERCEPTION OF NORTHEAST (NE) BY NON-NE

#### 5.1 Northerner

Indian belonging to one of the 8 states of India. Both NE and non-NE are Indian.

#### 5.2 Non-NE

All participants who belong to other parts of India excluding the NE region of India and must have stayed in Delhi for minimum 1 year, at least to get exposed to NE people.

#### 5.3 Method & Tool Used

To understand the perception of NE (Indian) by non-NE (Indian) a semi-structured, qualitative, indirect method was used to generate responses on various dimensions about NE. The study used incomplete sentence blank in lines of the Twenty Sentence Statement<sup>20</sup>. In this modified form of sentence completion task, an initial stem of "Northeast people" along with various dimensions (20) such as (food, dressing, culture and people) and followed by blank spaces were added to illicit various responses from non-NE participants.

#### 5.4 Sample

Data were collected from 20 non-NE college students and 10 non-NE research scholars of Delhi University. Participants' age ranges from 18 to 30, with a mean age of 20.8. All participants were female.

## 5.5 Procedure

The Incomplete Sentence Blank was disseminated and responses were collected. Responses were content analysed. Patterns were identified and frequency of the responses were noted.

## 5.6 Methodological Challenges

The major challenge faced by the researcher in collecting data was her identity as a person belonging to NE person. Non-NE participants gave more socially desirable responses while using face to face interview. So, incomplete Sentence completion task was created to reduce social desirability of responses. Though any method is not full-proof from such biases.

## 6. DATA ANALYSIS (PRIMARY DATA: INCOMPLETE SENTENCES BLANK)

For the first half of the study Incomplete Sentence Completion task which was conducted on non-NE participants to decipher their perception about NE. Data was content analysed, using the criterion of repetition/frequency of emerging categories. And the data are presented in order of the importance, or conviction with which the participants have expressed and also considering higher frequency to be presented at (Annexure I).

Perception of non-NE people about NE people as inferred from their NE friends and people they have contacted/observed can be broadly seen under few categories: Culture, Nature of NE students, Inter-personal relationships and roadblocks faced by NE.

### 6.1 Northeast Culture

Broadly, the culture of NE has been reported as unique and exotic: rich, diverse, colourful, interesting and pleasant by non-NE participants. Whereas some participants mentioned NE as a mixed culture of Indian and Western. Other important components of culture include food, dressing and values.

Major understanding of non-NE participants about NE food and cuisines is that NE people consume mostly non-vegetarian food at large. A few participants referred to vegetarian foods such as rice, green leafy vegetables or “subtle tasting yet healthier food”. Some have mentioned about the native cuisines of NE including bamboo shoot, even sea food, as they speculated what NE people might eat. The findings indicate that NE people are no longer perceived as just eating dogs or meats, as is the usual stereotypical perception.

When it comes to dress, it has been explicitly mentioned by a large number of participants that NE people are highly fashionable, wear modern dresses and ethnic attire only during festivals. Major emphasis was on NE fashion. “Fashion sense one of the best I have witnessed” as one participants remarked. ‘Modern’ and ‘western’ has been the key word to describe NE people which needs to be explored further, as in certain North Indian contexts being modern is considered to be non-traditional, fast or even debauched. Similar concerns in lines of food and dressing have also been highlighted in others work<sup>17</sup>.

Regarding values, non-NE participant’s responses clearly show that they perceive NE people having “open mindedness

and tolerance/acceptance”. Some of the exemplars cited by non-NE participants: “They (NE) don’t think about Casteism, they don’t create negative attitude towards northern people”, “NE people don’t differentiate based on state/culture”. These perception can be accounted by the different societal norms and gender relations in both the regions. More egalitarian community based society in NE whereas more patriarchal in NI society. These differences in societal matrix also adds certain gap in perception. Similar points on value differences have also been found about who sets the rule and how one is being judged differ in both NE and northern region of India<sup>17</sup>.

Another signature value showcased by NE people as perceived by non-NE participants is being “cultured and maintain etiquette”. It can be seen from the Table 1, that NE people have been reported to be ‘never loud or shout, not hurt others sentiment willingly nor to put their nose in others’ business etc. NE people have also been seen as “accepting change” and “being gentle, not cunning or manipulative”. Many highlighted the genuine nature of NE people in their responses. Previous study also highlight the perception of NE people as docile, soft-spoken, honest, committed and nice, similar to the findings of the present study<sup>21</sup>.

### 6.2 Nature of NE Students

From the responses given by non-NE participants one can infer that NE people have been seen as “relationally warm, welcoming and respectful”. Responses such as: “Warm & much easier to talk to” and, words such as sweet, friendly, amicable, welcoming, loving, hospitable, cordial, outgoing, kind, inviting, etc. have been generously used by non-NE participants to describe NE people at large.

Also NE people have been perceived as “helpful”, “respectful”, “calm and simple”. Other characteristic nature of NE which has been reported is the “fun-loving” side. It can be inferred clearly from responses such as “outgoing”, “Jolly, Happy-go-lucky”, “fun and mischievous”.

Another peculiar nature of NE people as mentioned by the participants is their inherent tendency to stay in their own groups. They are also regarded as “non-assertive”. Responses such as “They (NE) do not raise their voice”, “Tolerate being treated poorly”, “sweet gullible” clearly depicts that NE people are also perceived as negative. Even their politeness and reserved nature was seen negatively by others. Responses like “attracted to their tribe”, “sensitive at times”, “they don’t talk to people they don’t know”, by non-NE highlights how NE people are being perceived as less social or withdrawn by others. Also a feeling of “inferiority” has been associated with NE students by non-NE participants, citing reasons that NE are not advanced as others in education, job opportunities and money.

When it comes to hobbies of NE people, non-NE participants have mostly cited “fun-activities”. This to some extent indicates superficial and biased perception of non-NE participants, since most of them have not mentioned any other more scholastic or serious hobby like reading books or art etc. Other activities include “exploration”, “adventure”, “travelling”, “cooking Korean style food”, “and watching Korean drama”. Interestingly, NE people have been described

as “creative” in dressing up or in make-up etc. by few participants. Not so frequent responses include “love their tradition and follow”, “religiously engaged at times” and as people who do their “work passionately”.

### 6.3 Inter-Personal Relationship of NE People

Interpersonal relationship has been analysed under three categories - as friends, as students and in-group as their comfort zone.

As friends NE people are reported as being “trustworthy friend” and fun-friends by non-NE participants. Phrases such as “they make excellent friends”, “fun to be with you can share anything”, “Good terms with everyone” marked the responses. When asked who are NE people friends with?, the responses showed that NE people look for comfort in their own groups (in-groups of NE students) and they seek acceptance with Non-NE people, implying that they do not usually get it. Some exemplars which highlight includes: “All who treat them like friends”, “Not initiative but if you start talking then they also talk”.

As students, mostly NE are seen to be “average and silent” and as possessing “good communication skills”. Some phrases expressed by non-NE participants clearly portray how NE behave in classroom situation, “not interactive with students as well as teachers”, “not much interested in studies”, “don’t answer much in the class but smart”, “Some hardworking and some careless”, “Cool and chilled”. Participants also described NE as being “cooperative”, “dedicated and sincere”. Very few have expressed NE as being “smart and equally competent” with others. However the dominant responses are confined to average category.

NE people also seem to stay in their comfort zones amongst themselves. Often they exhibit “strong in-group preference” when it comes to mingling with people. “Attracted to their tribe”, “Prefer NE people”, marked the responses. Also branded as “small group & strong one” which highlights their tendency to stay in-groups only. Reasons for favouring friendships with NE people are that it provides a sense of togetherness, support and understanding<sup>21</sup>. Other reasons for the withdrawn nature and in-group preference is defence against racism and aggression. Previous research suggested an emerging “adjacent identity” along with the other existing identities (like tribal identities, pan-NE identities or any ethnic identities) among NE people in response to racism or shared cosmopolitanism<sup>18-19</sup>.

### 6.4 Roadblocks Faced by NE Students

Non-NE participants did extrapolate the problems being faced by NE, which are as follows:

The first challenge is encountered at a “stereotypical mind-set level” which manifest as either stereotype or prejudice and at a behavioural level as discrimination. This problem is being compounded by “lack of contact”, “ignorance of others”, and “not given enough importance” as clearly remarked by non-NE participants. Some responses such as “Mostly people think they are SC/ST and inferior” showcase a tinge of what other perceive about NE.

Other roadblock is “different cultural and physical

aspects” of NE people. Responses such as: “they are treated differently as if they are not Indian by society”, “Couldn’t make friends as they are little tough to get along because of language differences” highlights the point. Further, this leads to non-NE people ignoring NE or lack of acceptance as evident from the responses. Explicit response given by participants include: “People don’t accept them in North-India.

Finally, some “structural problems” being faced by NE people ranging from “NE’s geographic and political scenario” including poor connectivity and less infrastructure development, poor education facility, less opportunities. These can also be a reason for NE people having a sense of inferior feeling, insecurities and vulnerabilities, cultural gap, faulty notions and social labelling. And due to the cultural gap often NE people are said to be non-conforming to social values<sup>21</sup>.

The above analysis clearly points towards the changing perception of NE people by non-NE people. The changes are positive. Still perception of the NE people by non-NE is quite limited, and in subtle ways biases have crept in. For instance, hobbies of NE people are seen as quite superficial in nature like shopping, partying, doing makeup and fashion. Despite the fact that NE people have been viewed as open-minded, polite, adaptive, trustworthy, yet not many non-NE view them as less sociable. They are seen as favouring their in-group. One gets a hint of blaming when the NE students are seen as submissive, feeling inferior, not participating in class, average students etc., that disregards the kind of challenges they face on a day today level (like adapting to a completely new culture). However, there is acknowledgement by the non-NE participants regarding racism and lack of acceptance that NE people are subjected to. Misperception has also been cited as one of the main reason for discrimination<sup>21</sup>.

## 7. STUDY 2: EXPERIENCE OF NORTH-EASTERNERS DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

For study 2, secondary sources of data were taken using search words such as “Northeast during Covid-19”, “Racism & Covid-19” in Google. Newspaper (national dailies) and other reliable media reports from 7 February 2020 to 8 April 2020 were taken up for analysis. Due to high consistency of news from one source to another, only prominent ones were picked up for the present study.

### 7.1 Data Analysis (Secondary Data)

The secondary sources were also content analysed in inductive nature and indigenous categories were developed (Table 1) for understanding the actual behaviour of non-NE people towards the NE people, during the Covid-19 crisis. More than 25 incidents all over India were taken up for analysis.

Table 2 depicts the analysis from the secondary data. The report, released by Rights and Risks Analysis Group (RRAG) in March 2020 cited 22 emblematic cases of racial discrimination or hate crimes against people from NE<sup>22</sup>. Besides this, various national newspapers and websites were flooded with blatant cases of racism against people from NE during the COVID-19 times.

In one case two NE girls were threatened to be evicted in Ahmadabad, Gujarat. The reason of being “bringing



**Table 1. Perception of North-easterners/NE (Indian) by non – NE (Indian) during COVID-19 crisis in secondary data.**

Category	Sub-category	Description
Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prejudiced mind-set of people</li> <li>• Alleged accusation</li> <li>• Misperception as foreigners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treating NE people as foreigners</li> <li>• “bringing coronavirus in India”</li> <li>• “Are you from China?”</li> <li>• “you are not Indians”</li> <li>• “...Chinese ho na ho kisi ko kya pata hoga?”</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrimination</li> <li>• Intolerant to Oriental/Mongoloid feature</li> <li>• Dehumanization</li> <li>• Denial and ignorance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name calling “corona”, “coronavirus” or “Chinese”</li> <li>• Sacking employees from NE</li> <li>• Eviction from houses by landlords</li> <li>• Felt being treated like a dog, we too are humans; “<i>just a pile of garbage where I can spit</i>”.</li> <li>• Even after showing proof people refusing to accept NE as Indian</li> </ul>

coronavirus in India”. In Kolkata, harassment by landlord and neighbours to vacate house and neighbours shouted, “go corona go”<sup>22</sup>. Previous research also raises the issue of rent hike – how landlords sometimes use their power on NE tenants, charge exorbitant rent prices etc.<sup>17,21</sup>.

Two cases were about females who were spat at, one in Delhi and other in Mumbai. In the ghastly incident the Manipuri female student in Delhi was spat at by a middle aged man, who called her “corona” and spat ‘*paan*’ on her<sup>22</sup>. Some remarks by the girl are as follows:

“...deliberately aiming at my face and shouted ‘corona.’ He could clearly identify a ‘chinky,’ a race deemed inferior... lower than human...”<sup>23</sup>.

Meiyang Chang, the Chinese origin Indian actor had to bear the brunt of racism and he used social media to express his hurt at being called “coronavirus” on a street in Mumbai<sup>22,24</sup>. Similarly incidents of calling Northeast people as “coronavirus” or “Chinese” be it from Kolkata, West Bengal, Mysuru, Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai (TISS, Mumbai) and Punjab due to Mongoloid features of NE has been reported<sup>22,24-25</sup>. Activist Ms Alana Golmei (chairperson: Northeast Support Centre and Helpline in Delhi) and her friend from Meghalaya have also reported as being called “corona virus aa gaya” in NCERT campus, Delhi<sup>22,28</sup>.

Some racist comments included, “Look, corona is here!” In another stark incidence, a 74 year old cancer patient and his daughter were denied entry into apartment complex in Maharashtra, speculating them to be Chinese<sup>22</sup>.

In many cases NE are being judged first based on their different facial features, misunderstood and treated unfairly<sup>18</sup>. They are subjected to name calling (chinky), or treated as being exotic as something to be exhibited in places like museums, as head-hunters or as tribal etc.<sup>24-25</sup>. Description of NE culture in the above “study-1” also reflected the sense of “exotic” being expressed through the responses of NI students.

Three cases from Pune highlighted how NE people were subjected to comments like:

“woh log to locals aadmi hai, tum toh Chineseese..., kisiko pata tere paas coronavirus hai ki nahi (they are locals, you are from China and no one knows whether you are infected with coronavirus or not)” or screamed “Chinese”<sup>28</sup>.

In another case, a 24 year old woman from Sikkim, was

denied treatment by two hospitals in Kolkata for urinary tract infection and was locked in an isolation ward with a F.I.R. against her stated:

“...I had no symptoms, I felt like...treated as a dog...the nurse for medicine, but she just ignored me. The doctor asked, “Are you from China?”<sup>23</sup>.

In another incident, two boys from Nagaland living in Mysore were not allowed to buy groceries from a supermarket as the security personnel thought that they “were not Indians”<sup>24</sup>.

“...we showed them our ID proof.... But they kept repeating that we were not Indians. We were arguing to prove ourselves as an Indian in our own country...”<sup>29</sup>.

In other incidents not only people from NE origins were targeted, yet all those who have oriental features have been found to be put under surveillance or racial scrutiny as suspect of COVID-19 cases. And ever since the outbreak, undoubtedly China has also been battling with Sino phobia. Some of the incidents where people of non-NE origin have been targeted unfairly because of their facial features during COVID19 include Jwala Gutta, a celebrated athlete who has represented India at the highest level in mixed and women’s doubles badminton events, who hails from a mixed origin (born to a Chinese mother and a Telugu father) revealed that she has been called ‘half-corona’ because of her Chinese mother<sup>30</sup>.

## 8. OVERALL DISCUSSION

From first part of the study, it is evident that there has been a positive shift in the perception of NE people by Non NE people studying in Delhi, though at a superficial level only. One thing to be noted here is that out of 30 non-NE participants all have reported having an average of 2 NE friends with an exception of one person who reported more than 2. This clearly indicates that contact does play a role in reducing prejudice<sup>1,12</sup>. Still subtle forms of prejudice present in the out-group (Non-NE group). The above findings also support the dual process theories of attitude<sup>31</sup>, which posit that attitudes occur at two levels – implicit and explicit. Participants of the first part of the study are educated and hence show a positive perception/favourable attitude towards the NE people at an explicit level. However, implicitly they hold subtle prejudices towards the NE people, which has already been discussed earlier. Rather than extremely explicit discrimination, Sohi & Singh also talked

about how micro aggression among Northeast people living in Delhi<sup>32</sup>. Other studies have also highlighted the negative effects of such seemingly trivial action on the mental health of the marginalised groups like rising frustration or lowering subjective wellbeing<sup>33-34</sup>.

Another interesting thing to be discussed is the reason for the overall positive perception of NE at one level and their discrimination, name calling and dehumanizing experiences at the other level. The rise in cases of racism all over the country during the COVID-19 pandemic is something to be explored. It could be that during times of normalcy, people tend to see the out-group in a less biased manner as compared to the times of a crisis. The likely explanation for the same can be brought by referring to the Terror Management Theory. Terror Management Theory proposes that awareness about one's death makes human shelter themselves either using worldview or self-esteem<sup>35</sup>. Worldview provides people stable values which give hope to be alive or even life beyond death while self-esteem allows people to evaluate themselves highly<sup>36</sup>. Many research has shown how these mechanisms influences attitudes towards out-groups as mere presence of people with different values in a way threaten human's psychological security. Specially, when the awareness about death is looming, it seems people often act in many ways such as become hostile to those who hold different world view<sup>37</sup>, undervalue others based on their ethnic background or people with different cultural background<sup>38</sup> or to judge harshly to those having different values<sup>39</sup>.

Similarly non-NE people who are acting hostile or exhibit their racist side towards NE people might have been triggered by the deathly Corona virus or COVID-19. Terror Management Theory in conjunction with the "availability heuristics"<sup>40</sup> and "category prototype"<sup>41-42</sup> in the present context where any NE person seem to represent in the eyes of non-NE as a Chinese or foreigner which was the epicentre of COVID-19 might help in explaining the behaviour and attitude of many toward NE. Moreover previous research found that NE who self-stereotype as a prototype of NE has also seemed to be more distressed caused by invisibility, a form of micro-aggression<sup>32</sup>.

In intergroup relations, it has been well documented about in-group favouritism and out-group negativity. There are some evidences that ethnic stereotype tend to be assigned often to out-group than in-group<sup>43-44</sup>. Intergroup threat theory (ITT) assumes threats to be the causes of prejudice, and inextricable link between threat and prejudice. In a study of Hindu-Muslim relations in India, findings suggest symbolic threat as a predictor of prejudice for Hindu (high-status group), whereas realistic threat as predictor for Muslim (low-status group)<sup>46</sup>. Symbolic threat concerns with difference in social norms, morals and values whereas realistic threat pertains to availability of resources, power or general welfare. Thus it is plausible to explain the current study in light of either symbolic or realistic threat in relation to the blatant racism being shown by others or non-NE towards NE people. Like ITT, Socio-functional Approach suggest threat as a cause of prejudice<sup>47</sup>. Justification Suppression model highlighted threat perception as a dynamic process, and cite reason for the threat to be authentic or be plausible to serve as explanations for prejudice<sup>48</sup>. Though

some research suggest threat perception as a way to explain prejudice, rather than forming the source of prejudice<sup>49</sup>.

## 9. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study highlights certain gaps in perception that still exist between NE and non-NE and possible reasons for the same. Though people's perception towards NE is undergoing some positive changes, it appears these changes are superficial. As when a threat is perceived or fear of death is experienced, like during the current times of COVID-19 pandemic, blatant acts of racism has been recorded. This gap between NE and non-NE or NI is influenced by the process of "othering" which happens from both the sides which needs to be bridged<sup>50</sup>.

With the recent increase in geo-strategic importance of India's northeast in government policies from changing Look East to Act East Policy or the fast changing scenario in Northeast<sup>19</sup>. And for overall integration of India as a one nation, voices from the historically neglected people will help in formulating more relevant policies for people.

One significant limitation of the present study was over reliance on self-reported measures and secondary sources of data, which might have given a single layer of people's perception.

Thus, future research on the related topics towards understanding NE people or an attempt to bridge the cultural or geographical gap can take into account of the findings of present study and improve upon. As have been discussed in detail, it is evident that there are various misconceptions floating around on Northeast people. Some of the way to reduce includes better communication from both side, be open-minded rather than judging, held community workshops and awareness program on NE, or inclusion about Northeast in school curriculum in a big way might help.

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Contributed in analysis of secondary data, editing and overall planning of the paper.



**Annexure 1**

**Perception of Non-NE people (Mostly North Indians) about the North-easterners in sentence completion task**

Category	Sub-categories	Exemplars
Culture	Unique & exotic	Unique and different (4), (Vivid, Diverse; Rich, Colorful). Interesting (2), enjoyable Indian mixed with western
	Non-vegetarian and vegetarian	Non-Veg (5), (Meat fish, Pork, Chicken) Healthy food, Rice (3), Boiled vegetable (2), (Green leaf soup, less fried and masala, stew & soup, steam stuff).
	Native food habits	Native cuisine (Bamboo shoot, Seafood). Fast-food (noodles, Spicy dishes, Momos).
	Modern Dressing sense	Western dress and modern (3) Usual (like other, light and comfortable with, well dressed)
	Fashionable	High fashion sense - 2 (Fantastic, Smartly, fashionably, modestly; elegantly; colorfully).
	Ethnic wear	Ethnic (2), Prefer cultural dress during festival.
	Values of openness and acceptance	Modern, open-minded, liberal, accepting change. Cultured and Maintain etiquette (never shout or be loud; never hurt others sentiment willingly/ purposefully, don't put their nose on others matter, civilized,) Gentle, not cunning or manipulative Honest and authentic (4), (Speak truth).
	Relationally Warm	Warmth, Helpful (9), (Friendly-3, kind-3, sweet-2, cordial-2, amicable, hospitable, outgoing, inviting, etc.) Respectful (9) (decent-2, courteous, well mannered - 2)
	Welcoming & respectful	Calm and simple 3 (good natured - 1, peace loving, nature loving, polite-4; good-6) Fun-loving (2) (Outgoing, Jolly, Happy-go-lucky, fun,). (Talented & smart; impressive, maintained, pleasant, attractive).
	Nature of NE students	Peculiarly withdrawn Stay in their own groups
Hobbies		Fun activities (Sing, dance, enjoy music, watch Korean (2), k-pop culture, spend time with friends) Games (6) (play amazing football, basketball, swimming), Cooking(4), (Korean style, wai-wai) Shop (2), (lot of outing, party, fashion) Exploration and adventure, (Travelling, try to explore new things). Cultural stuff (Talking about their culture (2), follow tradition; opt for their traditional work engage religiously) Creative things ( Dressing nicely, Make-up) Study (do their work passionately).
As Friends		Trustworthy friend (loyal-2, dependable, honest, helpful, caring). Good communication skills (Good listeners-2, empathetic, caring, understanding (2), cooperative). Fun friends (Mischievous, Fun loving, joyful, engaging)
Inter-personal relationships	As Students	Mostly average, not much studious (5) (Quite, Shy, Do not indulge in any activity; Sitting alone). Cooperative, dedicated and sincere. Smart (Intelligent sharp minded, Sincere, Bright).
	In-group as the comfort zone	In-group leaning (stay in their own ethnic groups) “attracted to their tribe” “Small group & strong one” “with friends very active” and “teasing among friend”

Category	Sub-categories	Exemplars
Roadblocks faced	Stereotypical Mind set of people	Stereotype by Northern states, Prejudice, Racism & stigma, discrimination. Lack of contact, ignorance of others, Not given enough Importance,
	Different Cultural & physical aspects	Different language & Facial features Lack of acceptance (People don't accept them in NI)
	Structural problems	Geographic and political scenario Lack of interaction of other communities with NE Less facility for education and job (2), Lack of government initiatives