

Challenging Stereotypes: Reinventing the national discourse on the North East

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Ethnic clashes between Bodos (Assam's biggest tribal group) and Muslims in lower Assam in early May, forced media attention once again to the myriad conflicts stemming from contested identities in the North East. Election rhetoric around issues of illegal migration into north eastern states, targeted at specific vote banks seems to have further fuelled the reportage. A fortnight on, perhaps understandably, the region has faded from the media's radar, since action has now shifted to New Delhi with the country ushering in political change.

Typically, issues from the North East despite making headlines, are often lost in translation. The gravity and historic context of the conflict is often lost *en masse* in the national public consciousness. Mass media's access to the lowest common denominator makes it a crucial player in building nation narratives and breaking stereotypes. These narratives can come handy for the state to make sure the message is clear in areas to prone to conflict, where citizens are often victims of misinformation and agenda driven campaigns.

This is not to say that bridging perception gaps will resolve the conflicts in the North East, but the case has to be made to at least inform and build common frames of reference and initiate larger public interest in the region. If attempts have been made already, then we need to investigate their limited presence in influencing opinions and debates in the larger national consciousness. It's paradoxical that despite the rise in rich academic research on the various problems plaguing the North East, their play in mass public discourse is negligible and incident oriented.

Insurgencies have been raging on in the North East for decades, yet unlike Kashmir – which has become ingrained in public consciousness and the national discourse – one could argue that the North East has not received the same attention. Apart from spot reports on violence, which is definitely a step forward from the early days of complete ignorance; there

is little effort to understand the contested narratives of the various conflicts. Images of the Manipuri women protest against the rape of Manorama Devi in 2004, anti-AFSPA activist Irom Sharmila, and shots of training camps of the ULFA are regurgitated time and again in the mass media. While these are powerful and symbolic, they have stereotyped a complex region with a flattened idea of homogeneity.

Such perceptions fail to inform that each of these states has its own distinctive culture, many competing identities and internal conflicts. In popular imagination, the North East is a monolith, and there has been very little effort to challenge this representation. Every time a student from the North East gets harassed in Delhi, opinion columns are flooded with words like ‘alienation’, ‘prejudice’ and ‘integration of the North East’. But is there an interest beyond the superficial?

In a survey which got a lot of attention two years ago, it was revealed that stereotypes that haunt the North East were still very basic.¹ In their results 87% Indians outside the North East, could not name all seven states. 52% had a negative perception of the region and their reflections were limited to "insurgency", "most underdeveloped states" and "people with mongoloid features and weird food habits". 76% were unaware of peace talks underway in the region and 30% said they would never seek employment in the NE even if suited career interests.² While you may choose to argue with the findings, it does reflect the extent to which the frames of reference are skewed. If this is still the starting point, then there is a lot of work which needs to be done.

Blaming the media singularly for the abysmal state of misinformation is nothing but shooting the messenger. It's a chicken and egg situation, if you ask the national media why the bias in coverage, they argue a lack of audience interest. Sadly the regional media too hasn't been able to perform its role independently. Reporters from the region have told me that they are under constant pressure from insurgent groups to carry their press releases verbatim, they do it for survival. They also say that if local media are overtly critical of the state their advertisements are cut down. Often the "state's paranoia of misuse of media platforms by miscreants" becomes the biggest obstacle in challenging narratives of armed groups.³

¹ "People have negative perception about North-East, reveals study", May 7, 2012, The Hindu, accessed on URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/people-have-negative-perception-about-northeast-reveals-study/article3392188.ece> on Oct 25, 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Interviews conducted by the author with a group of Guwahati correspondents covering the north east on May 1, 2014.

If you look at the propaganda of many of these armed groups against the Indian state – the grievances espoused focus on neglect, lack of governance and resource and economic exploitation. Till development in the North East is achieved these discourses will only get amplified and appropriated along ethno-centric lines. What is surprising though is the lack of investment from the Centre and state governments to fight back the propaganda and challenge narratives.

The very fact that the term 'racism' is gaining currency to describe prejudices and biases in cases of assaults against people of the North East - should worry the Indian state. This framing of debate as 'the mainland vs periphery' with the vision of a homogenous North East, which is contrary to the reality on the ground, is the very essence of the problem.

The 'othering' of identities and perceptions, however, goes both ways and is not often reflected in the media discourse. In an eye-opener of a piece in *The Hindu*, Patricia Mukhim, the Editor of *The Shillong Times* questions eloquently that while the people from India's North East face severe discrimination in Delhi and elsewhere, has anyone asked how the northeast treat the 'outsiders'?⁴ She makes a case for the unreported incidents of attacks and discrimination faced by non-tribals struggling to survive in the North East. It is a dismal picture, starkly different from the flattened construction of a homogenous North East that is repeatedly manufactured in our public consciousness.

If the larger goal is to understand the challenges of the North East, it requires a strong national narrative which reconciles its many identities and adds to the peace process. Contested histories, tribal vs. non-tribal ethnicities, failure of states to provide for basics and security in the region, legitimate grievances and the profitable economics of war, have layered and formed the identities of people from this region. These need to find more representation. Till we arrive at an informed understanding of the region beyond the stereotypes which gain traction in our national public consciousness and debate, the North East will continue to suffer from both prejudice and indifference and the media will continue to wait for the next incident.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

⁴Politics of Identity and Location, Patricia Mukhim, April 24, 2014, *The Hindu*, accessed on URL : <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/politics-of-identity-and-location/article5949875.ece> on May 8, 2014.

