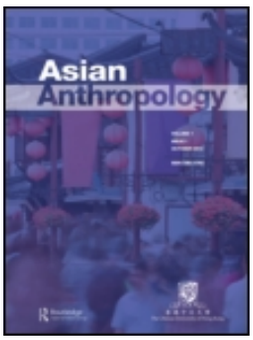

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The "Indian Face," India's Northeast, and "The Idea of India"

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This article introduces the concept of the "Indian Face" as a discursive and somatic image, or a face-scape, that represents the Indian nation with the aim of rendering legible the existing confusion between Mongoloid phenotypes, preponderant in India's Northeast, and Indian citizenship. We posit that Mongoloid phenotypes have not found a place in the common imaginary of the "Indian Face," although the latter is itself a highly diversified and inclusive concept. Northeasterners are often nonrecognized and misrecognized, or mirrored back by the wider Indian society as foreigners, hailing from such places as China, Nepal, Thailand, or Japan, and this withholding of "Indianness" works to discriminate against and marginalize them. To theorize this predicament we propose to substitute the logo-map, central to much theorizing of nationalism, with a "physiognomic map," drawn on the imaginings of what a co-citizen might look like. The nonrecognition, or nonacceptance, of Northeasterners as equal Indians extends, we will show, into the sphere of certain Northeastern vernacular cultural practices, which are deemed "Un-Indian" and subjected to "cultural policing." Taken together, the "Indian Face" and "cultural policing" work to delineate the physiognomic and cultural boundaries of "Indianness" and hence Indian citizenship.

Keywords: "the Indian Face"; Indianness; Northeasterners; national integration; policing culture

The Bollywood movie *Chak De! India* is about a fallen hockey coach who tries to redeem himself by becoming the coach of the Indian women's hockey squad with the goal of turning its 16 conflicting players into a winning team. The players come from all parts of India and the opening scene of the movie depicts the arrival of two players from the Northeast: one from Manipur; the other from Mizoram. When they step out of a rickshaw, dressed in "western clothes," they are spotted by a man on the roadside, who then turns to his friend and, referring to their lighter skin, remarks: "Man! Look at that vanilla ice cream amidst all this chocolate." He continues: "They must be heading to a disco or nightclub." He then insinuates that they are prostitutes and mischievously challenges his friend to ask them how expensive they are, joking: "They won't get our language [Hindi] anyway." When his friend accepts the challenge, and approaches the two girls, he is slapped in the face. Taken by surprise, he stammers: "They understand Hindi! I thought they were Chinese or Nepali." When the two women enter the stadium to register their arrival they are welcomed by a clerk: "Wow! You have come from the farthest reaches of India. You are special guests. Welcome." As the two women do not move, and look distraught, the clerk enquires: "What … are you not happy?," whereupon one of them replies: "Would you be happy being treated like an alien in your own country?"

Introduction

In 2009, the Chief Minister of the Indian state of Mizoram created a national controversy when he stated, after national daily newspapers and TV channels had started to report in

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dismay about rising incidences of racial discrimination committed against Indian nationals residing in Australia, that racism prevails in India too. "[People] ask me if I am from Nepal or elsewhere. They forget that the Northeast is part of India. I have told many that see, I am an Indian like you. I am a victim of racism" (cited in *Times of India*, June 26, 2009).

Being misrecognized as a foreigner is a common experience "Northeasterners" share when they leave their own region to travel or reside in India's "Mainland."[1] While this predicament, and associated manifestations of racial discrimination, have been reported in newspapers with some regularity, this article attempts to theorize this apparent confusion between Mongoloid phenotypes, preponderant in India's Northeast (although not exclusive to the region inside India), and Indian citizenship by introducing the concept of the "Indian Face" as a discursive image, or "face-scape," that embodies the Indian nation. Following Ramaswamy (2001), we approach the map of India not as a desocialized and rational depiction of a bounded national territory and, by extension, of the Indian nation, but as a "body-scape," or in our case a "face-scape." Whereas Ramaswamy aptly theorizes the cartographical deployment of "Mother India" as a somatic embodiment, or visual image, of the Indian nation, serving to enliven and instil nationalistic passion into "dead space" (2001, 109), we propose the common imaginaries of the "Indian Face", the idea of what an Indian might look like, as the somatic embodiment that represents the Indian nation.

Our thesis is as simple as it might be controversial. We posit that Mongoloid phenotypes, such as the epicanthic fold, high cheekbones and yellowish skin tones, have not found a place in common imaginaries of the "Indian Face." Instead, Northeasterners are nonrecognized and misrecognized, mirrored back by the wider Indian society as foreigners, hailing from such places as China, Nepal, Thailand, or Japan and on a visit to India, or as "lesser Indians" rather than as equal citizens; and this withholding of equal recognition of "Indianness" works to discriminate against and marginalize them. This predicament, we will illustrate, extends into the sphere of certain Northeast vernacular cultural practices that are delineated outside the domain of what is socially constituted as "properly Indian," and subjected to "cultural policing," a term applied by Comaroff and Comaroff (2004) to clarify the tension between crime and culture.[2] As in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, the title of Gilroy's (1987) well-known book in which he argues that "Blacks," even if born in the country (UK), are always seen as the "Other" because of their looks, there are no Mongoloid phenotypes in the "Indian Face."

The "Indian Face" assumes the position of a "physiognomic map" whose outer boundaries are not delineated by markers of territoriality but are based on considerations of phenotypes, drawn on the conventional imaginings of what a co-citizen might look like. The crafting of logo-maps figures centrally in the theorizing of nationalism, as maps first visualized the nation-space as a neatly demarcated and coherent territory; in the words of Winichakul, "a map anticipat[ing] … spatial reality, not vice versa" (1994, 310).[3] The idea that the nation is also made sense of as a "face-scape," or a "physiognomic map," has escaped such theoretical scrutiny, even though the popular imagination of what a co-citizen looks like, we postulate, plays a powerful role in the creation of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), perhaps as much so the visual representation of national territory on a bounded logo-map.

As a discursive concept, the "Indian Face" is inherently plural and, to a great extent, also inclusive. It embraces, among many others, the Bengali, Maharashtrian, Gujarati, and Tamil phenotypes, even though physiognomies are usually very different both within each community and between any two of them. Despite this vast variety in phenotypes, there is generally no confusion about their "Indianness." This courtesy is not extended to

Mongoloid phenotypes, which are regularly misrecognized as belonging to foreigners. The "Indian Face" is thus invariably about race and racial discrimination. While as a scientific category the concept of race now lies in disuse, and rightly so, popular conceptions of race have long outlived its critics. In our theorizing of the "Indian Face," and the physiognomic map it presents, we align with Eriksen in that one does not have to believe in the objective existence of racial differences to study "the social and cultural relevance of the *notion* that race exists" (2010 [1994], 6; emphasis in original). While there is no unitary view of race in India, its discourse continues to have a powerful effect on Indian scholars, and on certain organs of the administration as well as among the wider population (Bates 1995, 3), and while we do not intend to reinforce this discourse, we maintain that if we are to understand the predicament faced by Northeasterners within the wider Indian society, we cannot simply discard the popular conception of race.

In a wider context, this racial distinction and exclusion of Northeasterners is part of a common predicament faced by peoples living in the "Zomia" borderland – the vast upland transcending political and academic boundaries (van Schendel 2002b). These areas, located at the margins of nation-states, are now understood as ethnic scatter zones, inhabited by a multitude of ethnic groups. This internal diversity notwithstanding, what its inhabitants appear to have in common is that, from a mainland point of view, they – whether they are Northeasterners in India, "Jummas" of southeastern Bangladesh (van Schendel 1992), hill minorities in Burma (Gravers 2007), or Miao in upland China (Schein 2000) – are imagined as collectively different from the mainstream. This difference has led, in whole or in part, to their uneven, hesitant or haphazard accommodation into the nation-state, a predicament we try to grasp for Northeasterners in India by coining the concept of the "Indian Face."

The "Indian Face," in short, provides a tool to study the Indian nation and India's multiculturalism in a hitherto nonconventional way; it substitutes for the "logo-map" (socially empty, impersonal, and reliant on geometry) a "physiognomic map" (socially infused, humanized, and somatic) – and so exposes the tension between physiognomy and ascribed Indian citizenship. While the Indian logo-map excludes those residing outside the territorial boundaries of the polity, the "physiognomic map" excludes from the imagined, popular realm of the Indian nation those who do not "look Indian" but yet live within the Indian polity and possess Indian citizenship.

Nehru's "melting pot" and Patel's "Mongoloid alarm"

> "Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island," David Quixano, one of the main protagonists in Zangwill's classic play *The Melting Pot* (Zangwill 1921), exclaims. "In your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to – these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all!" Different nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and races, as Zangwill envisaged it, would fuse and blend into a new, virtuous community with a common culture, called "Americans."

The crucial point of the melting pot, Glazer and Moynihan would argue years later, is that "it did not happen" (1963, 290). Compared to Zangwill's concept of a future America, where national unity had to be actively constructed through the forces of assimilation, Nehru's perception of national unity in independent India was the opposite. In his *Discovery of India* (1994 [1946]), Nehru argued that Indian national unity need not be created but only unearthed, for it had always been simmering under a surface of cultural diversity. Across history, Nehru postulated, different communities inhabiting the Indian

subcontinent "retained their peculiar characteristics" yet "have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian"; thus, for Nehru, in 1947 an old nation was born anew. He continued: "Some kind of dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization of externals or even beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged" (Nehru 1994 [1946], 62). Or, as Indira Gandhi, as Prime Minister, reiterated: "Exclusiveness of any kind is alien to the spirit of India" (cited in Dhawan 1985, 152).

Nehru's reasoning at the time was not an isolated argument, and many anthropologists – Bose (1967), Dumont (1970), Marriot (1955), Singer (1972), and Sinha (1982), among them – propounded that India is best understood as a single civilization in which numerous cultures thrived and enriched that civilization in turn. Milton Singer's main argument in his classic *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (1972) could well have been written by Nehru himself:

> [This treatise is about] how Indians are changing their cultural traditions as they incorporate modern industry and how they are changing modern industry in order to maintain their cultural traditions. Indian modernization is not simply an aping of the West that destroys the traditional way of life, but rather a highly selective process of borrowing and innovation, which seeks to develop and incorporate novel elements into a highly organized and continuing civilization (cited in Harris 2001, 1).

However, Nehru's imagination of a perennial and inclusive Indianness took a blow when Sardar Patel, his then Home Minister, wrote him a letter:

> Our north-eastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the tribal areas in Assam. From the point of view of communication, they are weak spots … The contact of these areas with us is by no means close and intimate. The people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from pro-Mongoloid prejudices. During the last three years we have not been able to make any appreciable approaches to the Nagas and other hill tribes in Assam (cited in Kumar 1991, 16).

These "pro-Mongoloid prejudices," as Patel called them, were certainly not absent in the case of the Naga. A. Z. Phizo, then President of the Naga Nationalist Council (NNC), used the concept of race to support his claim for Naga independence:

> It is an undeniable fact that Nagas are not Indian. We distinctly and unmistakably belong to the great Mongolian family … The most important thing to consider is not merely one of politics but it is rather a problem of biology and psychology (Phizo 1951).

Patel's "Pro-Mongoloid prejudices" and Phizo's insistence on the incompatibility of the biology and psychology of the "Mongoloid family" with that of the Indian nation, refer to the concept of race in its classical sense, which collates physiognomy with psychological dispositions. While this idea is scientifically flawed, it carried, and still holds, strong rhetorical powers.

Nehru was not unaware of the different course large parts of then-undivided Assam had taken, and in his nostalgic description of India's rivers he refers to the Brahmaputra River, flowing through Assam, as "rather cut off from the main current of history" (1994, 51), but then includes it within the national fold by adding, "but living in an old story" (1994, 51). What exactly Nehru meant by "living in an old story" he did not elucidate. Historically, parts of Assam were conquered by kingdoms with their roots further east, like the Ahom and, for a much shorter while, the Burmese. With regard to great empires such as the Gupta and the Mughal, which controlled vast areas of present-day India, Assam

constituted imperial frontiers, and so existed "culturally outside 'Bharat'" (Subba 1998, 83). It was only after the British conquered Assam in 1826 that the area, for the first time in its history, obtained "a firm regional identity as a part of Indian imperial geography" (Ludden 2005, 13). Ludden refers to the Brahmaputra basin, and not to most parts of the adjacent hills, whose relations with the plains populations continued to be shot through with ambivalences, and were often antagonistic (Scott 2009; Wouters 2011), and which largely remained outside the direct ambit of the British administration, labeled as either "excluded" or partially excluded" areas (see Misra 2011; Robb 1997).

At the brink of Indian independence, the nationalism and patriotism stirred by the anticolonial movement did not climb high into the hills. For most of the hill tribes, the anticolonial movement was a distant project, and few people from India's Northeast were part of it. Instead, when the British colonial administration showed signs of withdrawing, some hill peoples such as the Naga, and later the Mizo, grasped the opportunity to articulate their desire for complete independence, claiming that they had at no point in history been part of India. Their efforts were of no avail. In the years after India's independence, the region was enclosed into the state – albeit not without setbacks and the use of military force – and those who were incorporated last turned into minorities virtually overnight.

Who is a Northeasterner?

As an identity with at least a reasonable level of coherence, we argue that the identity of Northeasterner does not exist within the Northeast region itself, which has instead been variously dubbed as an "ethnic explosion" (Nibedon 1981) and an "ethnographic chaos" (Jacobs et al. 1990), and where parochialism, tribalism, sharp political antagonisms, and communal distrust often inundate the social landscape. In fact, there is not a single criterion, be it culture (however defined), language, religion, ecology, economy or agriculture, that unifies the region or applies to the region alone, except, perhaps, a sense of shared alienation from the Mainland (Subba 1998), or, more recently, the orchestration of identities in a discourse of indigeneity (Subba and Wouters 2013).[4]

Being a Northeasterner can thus mean many things. What is certain is that the person hails from one of eight states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura or Sikkim – and belongs to one of the 200-odd communities in the region, depending on what criteria one uses to delineate them. His or her other characteristics are much less certain; most probably he or she is tribal, but this can hardly be taken for granted as "Scheduled Castes," "Other Backward Classes," and "General Castes" also live there. Chances are high that the person is a Christian, but he or she might as well be a Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or follower of an "indigenous faith." His or her mother tongue is likely to be Tibeto-Burman, although Indo-Aryan languages are mostly spoken in Assam and Tripura, and Mon-Khmer in the state of Meghalaya. The person is likely to have Mongoloid phenotypes but, then again, if from Tripura or Assam, he or she is more likely to have Indo-Aryan features. To complicate matters further, he or she might be a plains dweller or an inhabitant of the hills, "indigenous" or a later settler, a practitioner of wet-rice cultivation or an adherent of slash and burn agriculture, ruled by customs and customary laws (as safeguarded by Special Constitutional Amendments in some areas) or falling directly under the Indian Penal Code. The list can be endlessly extended, but "Northeasterner" can mean anything and nothing at the same time.

Of course, the very term "Northeast" depends on one's vantage point. The designation only acquires meaning after the question "Northeast of what?" is posed. The answer,

obviously, is "of Delhi and India's 'Mainland'." Significant parts of the region are, in fact, not located northeast of Delhi. The southern tip of Mizoram, for instance, is located at roughly the same longitude as Kolkata, while major Northeastern cities such as Guwahati, Imphal, Aizawl, and Shillong are all situated southeast of Delhi, further suggesting the imaginedness of the region. Although "Northeast" is a relational term, it is remarkable that not a single voice is raised against the term itself, which indicates implicit acceptance of the discourse of Indian unity. Hence, the Northeast, as a region with a pronounced measure of unity, strangely persists within the "debris of its own contradictions" (Subba 1998, 84).

What, then, is the Northeast, and who are Northeasterners? We posit that to the extent that the Northeast or Northeasterners appear as unitary they are to be understood as a social category produced and reified *vis-à-vis* mainstream India. The Northeast has become a coherent unit through administrative conceptions of order and institutionalized discursive spaces, and the enactment of special government institutions such as the North Eastern Council and the Ministry of Development of the North-Eastern Region. As an identity, possessing certain shared features, it also exists in the imagination of Mainlanders, who stereotype the region as "backward" and "dangerous." As such, the "Northeast" is both a myth and mythical. It is a myth because as a region with a certain internal coherence it does not exist, and mythical because references to the region are usually framed in a "tribalist discourse" (van Schendel 1992)[5] and shrouded in stereotypes, often reproduced from colonial writings, which account little for the rapid changes that have taken place in recent decades. Inhabitants of the Northeast are depicted as "exotic" and "erotic"; as the "Orientals of the Orientals" (Subba 1998, 80), a feature that we will later discuss as a form of "home-grown orientalism" (Po'dar and Subba 1991). In recent years, the identity of Northeasterners has grown among Northeast migrants residing in Indian metropolises where now exist Northeast Student Unions, separate hostels for Northeast students, and, in Delhi, as we discuss below, the North-East Support Centre and Helpline.

The following ethnographic section is about a particular "type" of Northeasterner, and does not concern all inhabitants of the region equally. Using the concept of race in Eriksen's (2010) terms, we refer predominantly to the "Mongoloid communities" of the region and argue that their phenotypes have not found a place in the physiognomic map that represents the Indian nation.

"First time in India?"

Every year thousands of Northeasterners are drawn to India's large cities to take up educational and employment opportunities reserved for them under the Scheduled Tribe quotas.[6] Others are drawn by India's new modernity, and leave their home states to staff shopping malls, operate call centres, or work in the booming retail and hospitality sectors. The hospitality sector in particular has offered a racially marked niche in which Northeasterners form a highly visible segment of the labour force. Their lighter skins and mongoloid phenotypes seem to attract the international; for restaurants and café-owners in India's major cities, "a sprinkling of Northeastern faces around the place helps to create a cosmopolitan ambience" (cited in *Outlook India* 2007). Christine, from Nagaland, is one of those who found employment in Delhi's hospitality sector. She finished her education up to class 10 at home in Nagaland before she decided to try her luck in Delhi. She explains: "There are no job avenues in Nagaland. Only government jobs but I neither hold the qualifications nor the connections to get one of those. A few from my village had already gone to cities like Pune, Mumbai, and Delhi and they seemed to do pretty well there. I thought I should also give it a try."

For young adults like Christine, India's large cities offer opportunities that are not readily available in their own states. For others it is a way out from the problems of insurgency and ethnic tension they face in their home states. For still others, such cities serve as a convenient space away from family expectations and social obligations at home: a place where they can "experience life," as many put it. These benefits notwithstanding, their residence in India's Mainland and their mingling with local populations there is often shot through with ambivalences. Christine's case is no different:

> People in Delhi often think that I am a tourist, coming from China, Thailand, Korea, or Japan to see India. They ask me: "First time in India?" or "How do you like India?" and shopkeepers and auto-drivers try to overcharge me. Once I went to visit the Red Fort with a friend and one person, who was from Mangalore, asked us to pose with him for a picture as he wanted one with foreign tourists in it. We did what he asked but later felt quite bad about it. Sometimes I get agitated when they think that I am a foreigner. It makes me feel that I am not an Indian.[7]

A major hurdle for Northeast migrants in Indian metropolises is the language gap. Christine experienced this: "That I don't speak much Hindi doesn't help either. I mean, I try to learn it, but I can never compete with the locals. They easily out-talk me." Then there are snide remarks and sexual harassment that girls from the region have to face. Christine narrates:

> They call us "Chinky" and think we are cheap. They whistle at us, call us "honey" and "sweetheart", and ask "how much?" This has not happened just once or twice; we have to go through this almost on a daily basis. One day, when I came back from work, a person grabbed his crotch while looking at me with a strange smile on his face. Some seem to think that they can do anything to us and they know that the police are not likely to help us. But I am fortunate with my landlord. He is kind and understanding. Some of my friends aren't that lucky and have to face many difficulties with their landlords, including instances of sexual harassment and sudden, unexplainable rises in the rent.

The predicament faced by Christine and other Northeasterners has now been formally acknowledged by Delhi Police, and a 2012 Standing Order issued by the Commissioner of the Delhi Police stated that:

> It has been reported time and again that they [Northeasterners] are addressed with derogatory adjectives or face discrimination in the form of targeted attacks, assaults, molestations and other atrocities. This has caused considerable anguish and distress in the minds of persons from the North-Eastern states and is adversely affecting the process of national integration … Delhi Police has adopted Zero Tolerance Policy in this regard … If there is any complaint regarding any cognizable offence like Eve-teasing, stalking, or indecent/suggestive/unacceptable SMS messages, gestures to a person from the North-Eastern State [sic] and prompt action is not taken, then a very serious view shall be taken against the concerned police officer (Commissioner of Delhi Police 2012).

This renewed assertiveness on the part of Delhi Police is welcomed by most Northeasterners, although many are also skeptical, point to the insolence of police officers in response to their problems in the past, and doubt whether these instructions from "the top" will really lead to a change of attitude among the local constables.

As Christine reflects on her future in Delhi: "Strangely, I have grown somewhat accustomed to the eve-teasing and remarks I face. I choose not to hear them. But yes, sometimes when bad things happen I long for back home. But then again, what will I do there? At least I have a job here. I am just trying to cope with all of it the best I can."[8]

Policing Northeast cultures

Multiculturalism is of course not a given, but a choice. As a normative ideal, India's multiculturalism is firmly ingrained in its constitution, which endorses the "right to

culture." It is also supported by a strong rhetoric of multicultural egalitarianism, propounded by successive prime ministers and a host of other political leaders. At the same time, however, India's multiculturalism is about national integration, about Nehru's historically simmering Indianness, and about "discovering" unity in a dazzling diversity. This rhetoric notwithstanding, this section will showcase, although our cases are admittedly somewhat anecdotal, that certain Northeast vernacular cultural practices are barred from the domain of "Indianness," and instead subjected to "cultural policing." While these regimes of "negative surveillance" are unlawful, as they infringe on the "right to culture," they are nevertheless real and palpable because they invoke the "language of legality" which, Comaroff and Comaroff (2004, 539) argue, operates to "delineate the moral frontiers of civil society" and to "criminalize vernacular practices deemed uncivilized" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004, 539). This "negative surveillance," backed by the "language of legality," is resorted to by certain organs of the government and semigovernment as well as by the wider population to create and assert the notion of "Indianness," and works towards the exclusion of Northeasterners.

The standing order issued by the Commissioner of Delhi Police, quoted above, was preceded by an altogether different approach. In 2007, the Delhi Police published a brochure entitled "Security Tips for Northeast Students/Visitors in Delhi." This brochure consists of "dos and "don'ts" for Northeastern students, supposedly meant to help them blend more smoothly with Delhi society. It urges them, among other things, not to cook and eat certain dishes that are popular in the Northeast, such as bamboo shoots, *akhuni* (fermented soya beans), and fermented fish, for these are considered "smelly" by inhabitants of Delhi, and may create "ruckus in the neighbourhood." It also instructs Northeastern women not to wear "revealing dresses", and if they do, "not to use lonely roads or by-lanes." The title of the booklet, which sets Northeasterners at a par with visitors instead of addressing them as co-citizens, is perhaps as telling as the content, which, in a word, implies that for Northeasterners to live freely and without fear in their own capital they should abstain from some of their traditional food items, change their style of dress, and abandon any other habit or custom that is not considered "properly Indian" by the people of Delhi.[9]

A clash over Indian food habits, or gastropolitics – the distinction between what one eats and what the other eats – played out a year after the publication of the police booklet when a Naga student was fined and evicted from his student hostel in Jawaharlal Nehru University, an epitome of liberal values, on the grounds of having killed and consumed a dog. Dog meat is a delicacy among a number of Northeastern tribes, including the Naga, and is freely marketed in Nagaland towns. When, however, remains of a dog were found in the Naga student's hostel room, a disturbance broke out on the university campus, joined by students and faculty members alike. A First Information Report (FIR) was filed with the Delhi Police and an online petition demanded that the "dog butcher," as he was now tagged, be expelled from the university.[10] The university administration refrained from expelling him, but nevertheless deemed the Naga student "unfit to live in a hostel" and summoned him to vacate his room, in addition to paying a fine of two thousand rupees.[11] This eviction demonstrated the delineation of the culinary boundaries of "Indianness," which, apparently, exclude the consumption of dog meat, even though its taste is preferred by many in India's Northeast.

The final case we highlight here is the run-up to the 2012 BRICS Summit organized in New Delhi, during which an unidentified number of Northeasterners were rounded up and placed under preventive detention. The reason was that they were mistaken for Tibetan refugees who, the government feared, were bent on launching protests where the Chinese

premier was staying. The state had instructed the police to avert Tibetan demonstrations in the vicinity of the summit, and in the confusion about physiognomy and citizenship that followed, the boundaries of the "Indian Face" were reproduced and reified by the police, who misinterpreted Mongoloid phenotypes as the identification mark of Tibetan refugees – who, in contrast to Northeasterners, are non-Indian nationals. In the words of a social activist from the region, reacting to the incident: "It is unfortunate that even after sixty-five of years of Independence our socio-political system has still not been able to accept people with Mongoloid features as Indians" (cited in *The Hindu* 30-03-2012).

Rather than "multicultural egalitarianism," or at minimum the "recognition of difference," the police booklet is a manifestation of "patronizing disregard," an attempt to demarcate the boundaries of "Indianness" and to fold Northeasterners within it by urging them, among other things, to purge certain "un-Indian" dishes from their traditional menus. The Delhi Police are of course a law-enforcement agency, not a law-making one, and while the booklet consists of "advice" and not of "laws," it nevertheless invokes the "language of legality" in the same way as any police directive does, in its final evaluation, backed by the threat of violence. Similarly, the university verdict was not based on any law, and the Government order to prevent a demonstration was not a license to round up people with "non-Indian looks," yet deeming the Naga student "unfit" to live in an "Indian hostel" and mistaking Northeasterners for Tibetan refugees operate to delineate the boundaries of "Indianness," exposing the limits of India's multiculturalism.

In a way, the differential treatment of the population is ingrained in India's constitution by virtue of affirmative policies for "Scheduled Tribes," "Scheduled Castes," and "Other Backward Classes," and for most Indian citizens the idea that everyone should be governed equally is a strange idea indeed. Yet the differential treatment meted out to Northeasterners is the exact opposite of affirmative policies. It is a suppression of difference, the assertion of a cultural hegemony, and the patroling of what is considered "proper Indianness," which is itself highly diverse and fragmented but nevertheless sufficiently hemmed in to exclude, in multiple ways, Northeasterners.[12] A country's margins, Das and Poole (2004, 10) contend, rather than just a physical periphery, can also be located "as a space between bodies, law, and discipline"; in the case of Northeasterners it is "cultural policing" that patrols this space.

Policing Northeastern female bodies

> [India's new modernity] had drawn thousands of women from the north-east, prized for their English and their lighter skin; it had also stoked the confused desires of men from deeply patriarchal cultures … [There] were neighborhoods where the local women went around wearing veils while the men eyed the outsiders, lusting after them and yet resenting them, considering themselves to be from a superior culture.
>
> (Siddhartha Deb 2011, 229)

In 2007, in Delhi, the North East Support Centre & Helpline was launched with the aim of fighting racial discrimination and violence meted out to Northeasterners, especially to Northeastern females. According to the Centre's own statistics, 78% of the Northeasterners in Delhi experience forms of racial discrimination, while nearly 50% of all sexual assaults in the capital happen to Northeastern females. Chandra, one of the cofounders, stated: "The issues we face are dissimilar to what others [other migrant groups in Delhi] go through. We are targeted because we look different … Even though people may not like to hear or agree with us … it's true that we are not considered part of the Indian society" (cited in Pathak 2011). As Christine also expressed, snide and insinuating

comments are an intrinsic part of the everyday experiences of Northeasterners in Delhi, as in other metropolises. Even if one wishes to cast doubt on the statistics gathered by the North East Support Centre, the fact that such a center exists, and that similar initiatives do not exist for migrants hailing from other parts of the country, further suggests that Northeasterner women are perceived and treated differently.

The predicament Northeastern women face appears to be part of an imagined conflation between "Mongoloid hill-dwellers" and "sexual liberty." The hills have been depicted, and are still imagined, as a place where a certain frankness is common, moral norms comparatively laxer, and less reticence is practiced between the sexes, even though influential church leaders in the region now preach premarital abstinence and moral restraint. When Northeastern females leave their home states for India's cities, this image travels with them, and often defines them in the eyes of the local population. As a woman from Mizoram summarized her stay of three years in Pune: "They think we are cheap because we look different, and inferior because we don't follow their culture."

The perception that Northeasterners are "unrestrained" has a wider scope than India's Northeast alone. To an extent, the peoples living in "Zomia" lands are not only characterized by their resistance to nation-building and state-making projects (van Schendel 2002b; Scott 2009), but are also widely viewed by "Mainlanders as peoples whose customs and norms, contrary to their own, allow for premarital (and extramarital) sexual intercourse; their social landscape, as a result, has been interpreted as both exotic and erotic, as both "morally antagonistic" to their own moral universe and a field of "wild fascination." Such perceptions of "sexual liberties" found a wider audience through colonial ethnography in which stories of "premarital" and "unrestrained" sexual activities were written, often accompanied by pictures of bare-breasted women and girls.

Van Schendel has succinctly depicted the postcolonial resilience of such images in the case of the Mru, living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of southeast Bangladesh but connected to India's Northeast via the states of Tripura and Mizoram. The Mru were often depicted naked in colonial photography and, in the moral universe of the Bengali community in the plains, their nudity was interpreted as "a sign of insanity, extreme poverty, loose morals and primitivity" (2002, 359). The image of the Mru as naked, van Schendel continues, has been reproduced and reified in the postcolony, and although the Mru today cover their bodies, the notion of nudity is still seen as "the essence of Mru identity and the badge of their disqualification as full-fledged citizens" (van Schendel 2002, 371). Similar stories apply to various other hill communities in Zomia, including the Miao hill minorities in China, about whom Schein (2000) argues that they are reconfigured by the dominant Han community as "sexual misfits" and, by extension, seen as "internal others." Schein (2000, 108) writes that "the internal or external others of the nation are portrayed as sexual misfits in a highly normative national sexual system," but that, drawing on Foucault, "the very definition of the national system relies on the identification and classification of those who do not fit the norm." This reasoning echoes Hall's argument that hegemony is not about overcoming difference but operates through difference (Hall 1995, 69): "hegemony is an authority which can be constructed *only* by continuing to recognize difference." Unlike Said's *Orientalism* (1978), here it is not the "Western gaze" but neighboring dominant communities in the plains who assert and reify the Mru, Miao and, indeed, Northeastern girls as "sexual misfits." It points to the historical multiplicity of the constellations of the power of representation, a process Po'dar and Subba call "home-grown Orientalism," which, in India, connotes the further division of the Orient in which the dominant Hindu society extends the received discourse from the West to the study of tribes without challenging it (1991, 247).

From this angle, Northeastern girls – their reconfiguration as "sexual misfits" and their subsequent denial of "equal Indianness" – provide the bodies on which the common imaginary of "Indianness," its moral boundaries and its sexual normative system reasserts itself (see Schein 2000). Racial discrimination and associated cases of sexual harassment thus assume a "structural predicament" rather than a mere societal pathology that can be cured by emancipation, better integration, or harsher punishments for transgressors.

Conclusion: the "Indian Face" and the Indian nation

If the "Indian Face" as a physiognomic map constituted the actual territorial borders of the Indian polity, much of India's Northeast would no longer be part of India. There is an international dimension to the "Indian Face." International travelers hailing from India's Northeast are held longer than "Indian looking Indians" at immigration checkpoints to ascertain whether they are truly Indian, know Hindi, or have other such qualifications people of India are expected to possess. The ordeal for them starts afresh at the immigration checkpoints on arrival if the expected face and the nationality to which a passport belongs do not match. One of the coauthors of this report invariably has to face such ordeals when he is travelling abroad, just because his face and his citizenship do not match the expectations of the visa or immigration officials. He would certainly travel more smoothly if he had a false passport as a Korean or Japanese.

In his treatise on *The Idea of India*, Khilnani (2004 [1997]) asks "Who is an Indian?" The answer, he admits, is complicated and has never been definitely settled. However, he identifies two broad, long-standing, and contrasting strands of "Indianness," which have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared in different guises throughout India's postcolonial history. The Nehruvian stance "discovered a basis for unity both in a shared historical past of cultural mixing, and a future of common development" (2004, 154). The opposite view, now politically represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), propounds the idea that Indian unity could be found in a common culture derived from Hinduism. It builds on the idea of "Hindutva," which expounds the notion of "one nation, one people, one culture" (Khilnani (2004 [1997]). Khilnani then goes on to discuss the bricks of the Babri Masjid (Mosque) in Ayodhya, which was demolished by an angry Hindu mob in 1992 claiming that the mosque occupied the birthplace of Ram, as the site over which "Indianness" is presently contested. It is here that India has to decide whether to construct a new Ram temple, to restore the demolished mosque, or to make it the ground of a civic monument celebrating the state's secular identity (Khilnani (2004 [1997], 152). For the very first time in history, Khilnani continues, the present generation of Indians has been given the responsibility to choose how to deal with India's internal diversity: "a theoretically untidy, improvising, pluralistic approach, or a neatly rationalist and purifying exclusivism … they must decide what they wish to build out of the wreckage of Ayodhya's Babri Masjid" (2004 [1997], 195).

Now, well over 15 years after the first publication of Khilnani's treatise, the people of India have made their decision, or rather the Allahabad High Court has made it on their behalf. It decreed that the disputed site be divided between Hindus and Muslims, thus endorsing the Nehruvian stance, although the case has since been taken to the Supreme Court, whose final verdict is pending at the time of writing. Aside from the question to what extent a legal decision necessarily reflects common sentiments, the point we want to assert here is that for most Northeasterners the bricks of Ayodhya, and whether they will be piled up in the form of a temple or a mosque, have little to do with their understanding of "Indianness." While the Nehruvian view of multiculturalism appears to be a

prerequisite for their integration on equal terms, the Constitutional guarantee of multiculturalism has little meaning for them as long as their phenotypes are not recognized or are misrecognized, as long as their phenotypes are not allotted a place within the "Indian Face." To return to Sardar Patel's "Mongoloid Alarm" and Phizo's emphasis on the incongruity of the "Mongoloid" and the "Indian race," it is paradoxical that while levels of "intimacy" have apparently grown between many, though not all, Northeasterners and the idea of India, many Mainlanders appear not yet quite ready to accept Northeasterners as fully fledged Indian nationals.

Notes

1. We place "Northeasterners" and "Mainland[ers]" in inverted commas to acknowledge the enormous internal diversities and antagonisms, which are so dazzling that they render such labels virtually meaningless. We will deal with this internal diversity in India's Northeast in more detail below. Having asserted this point here, in the remainder of this article we will not use inverted commas each time we use the terms Northeasterners and Mainland[ers].
2. In the ethnography of Comaroff and Comaroff (2004), the tension between culture and crime manifests itself in the sphere of occult-related violence in post-apartheid South Africa. While the "right to culture" is ingrained in the South African constitution (as it is in India's multicultural constitution) and while beliefs in witchcraft and retributive action against alleged mystical evildoers have a deep "cultural archaeology" and rely on "cultural dispositions," Comaroff and Comaroff show that policing the occult became part of the mundane work of the police. While the case of "Northeasterners" is perhaps less dramatic, we suggest that the concept of "cultural policing" is helpful to understand the forces of discrimination and exclusion faced by many Northeasterners.
3. This argument was adopted and extended by Anderson, who highlights the role of the map in the creation of imagined communities. As he puts it: "Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem for the anticolonial nationalism being born" (Anderson 2006, 175)
4. When one takes a worm's-eye view, one finds that every village in the region has its own identity and although many people have left their villages and settled in urban areas for better educational and employment opportunities, they continue to identify themselves with their ancestral villages. They also identify themselves simultaneously with their *khel*s or hamlets, lineages, clans, phratries, tribes, and more generic identities such as Naga and Mizo. During the past century or so, massive conversion to Christianity has created new identities based on religion or religious denominations. These are being added to the multilayered identities of the people of India's Northeast (Subba and Wouters 2013).
5. This "tribalist discourse," van Schendel (1992, 103) argues in the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, is grounded in the "presumption that all tribes share characteristics that are fundamentally different from, even opposite to, those of civilized people. Principal among these are 'childish' qualities that betray a lack of socialization: immoderately emotional behaviour (revelry, sensuality, extravagance, cruelty, fear of the supernatural) and naiveté (credulity, incapacity to plan for the future)."
6. Under India's reservation policy, a certain percentage of government jobs and vacancies in educational institutes are set aside for members of castes and tribes that are judged to be historically marginalized, comparatively backward and, on the whole, underrepresented in government positions. This reservation comes in the form of a quota-based affirmative action policy.
7. Kikon, herself hailing from the region, narrates how Nagas, when visiting a national museum in one of India's major cities, need to negotiate on identity and citizenship at the ticket counter: "As a Naga stands in the queue meant for Indians, there is a request to switch over to the foreigner's line. After speaking in Hindi, a brief lecture on history, geography, and the Naga people, the Naga/Indian is allowed to enter" (Kikon 2009, 92).
8. At the time of writing of this report, an interesting monograph on Northeast migrants in Delhi was published. Mcduie-Ra, in his *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (2012), deals with similar issues as we present here (and in more detail than we do), and, if

anything, further confirms that "Northeasterners" in Delhi are perceived and treated differently from others.

9. The publication of the booklet was widely criticized by Northeasterners, triggering accusations of social profiling. A member of the parliament of Arunachal Pradesh said: "If they are dictating food habits and a dress code, then it is cultural imposition" (cited in *North-Eastern News Agency* 01-08-2007). Others argued that the booklet portrayed Northeastern girls as having "loose morals", and that food habits are a personal and not a public affair. Others accused the police of embarking on a "civilization mission," while a common objection was that, here in the words of the then General Secretary of the Assam Association, "we cannot have a rule book for a particular section of the people. Why are they not having similar guidelines for students of other states?" (cited in *North-Eastern News Agency* 01-08-2007).
10. One protestor posted in the petition: "This is not an isolated incident but a periodic event which recurrently takes place in the campus as demonic Northeastern boys gather amidst a beer induced bravado and haul up street dogs that are later mercilessly decimated and barbecued." Another wrote: "Just a request to you all – let's keep an eye open for the Nagas always. I don't mean to speak against all Nagas, but it's just that many such incidents are reported around them." (www.thepetitionsite.com/1/horrific-murder-of-the-street-dog-in-delhi/)
11. Another storm over dog-meat was created in 2012 when a legislator in the Punjab Assembly proposed that all stray dogs in Punjab should be caught and sent to China, Mizoram, or Nagaland, for "whatever they do to them." He then continued: "People in China and the Northeast have their own ways of using the dogs. We cannot be really bothered with that. We have to solve our problem first. Stray dogs are killing children, attacking the elderly" (cited in *Times of India* 26-06-2012). This remark was widely condemned as defeating the purpose of improving emotional bonding between the Mainland and the Northeast. What was not protested, but seems equally remarkable, is the legislator equating the Northeast with China in terms of food habits, so perhaps pushing the Northeast further northeast of where it is now.
12. To be sure, these regimes of "negative surveillance" are not officially endorsed by the government, nor could they be for they would go against the grain of the multicultural Constitution; it is a demonstration of "unofficial governmentality," unofficial because it is "unlawful," not officially endorsed, and a deflation of the multicultural ideal, but still governmentality because it seeks to govern, control, and confine Northeastern practices and bodies.

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