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Racial Construction as an Avenue for Better Life: A study of Nepali Migrants and Their Employers in New Delhi

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Abstract: This paper views how Nepali migrants in India sell their identity to secure good jobs and money and create their own labour market. India is the most desired destination when it comes to work for the Nepali workers because of open border, shared culture, similar people and on the top of it, it does not require much investment unlike the gulf countries. They come to work in India to escape the political instability, high unemployment rate and low wages. Theoretically, race is not a biological concept, however the general public stills believe in the concept of race which is working positively for the Nepali migrants in the informal sector. This paper tries to bring forth in detail how these people use this 'race', but this usage is not restricted to the employee, even the employers benefit from this. Even the north eastern Indians are faking their identities to secure these jobs. They claim themselves as Nepali so as to get jobs as most of employers fail to distinguish between a Nepali and a north eastern and give them jobs on the basis of the image that has already been created by previous Nepali migrants. Apart from this many scholars have also talked about how migrants are often discriminated and exploited by the employers in a new land on many bases like colour, religion, in this case different facial features. Contrary to this, in my research I have found out that this difference is working in a positive way for them. These facial differences are giving them edge over other local worker. Since they are the sought after workers, the employers tend to behave nicely with them. I would also like to add that nowhere in my research paper, I am endorsing race but trying show how this concept is still used by the public to get access to various fields.

Keywords: Racial, Nepali Migrants, New Delhi.

1Introduction

Owing to globalization migrating to different countries has become very common. However migration between India and Nepal has nothing to do with globalization. The two nations exchanged citizens from olden times. India is one of the most preferred destination amongst the Nepalis.

In my research paper I have looked into the Nepali migrants that are working in the informal sector. I have tried to explore how the Indian employers make money by selling racial features of their employee and how these employees tap this racial confusion and secure a better job. Racial discrimination is ubiquitous in labour market. This paper also argues that both employers and employees use the idea of race for their mutual benefit. It is trying to show how employers and employee make use of their race, especially the tribal Nepali migrants working in the informal economy of India. Most of the scholarly works till now have been dealing with racial discrimination that exists in west between white or black, or even brown at times. This research tries to bring the attention of the readers to the concept of race that exists in developing countries from the developed nations. There are many literatures which bring forth the plight of racially inferior group in the West but not many scholars have paid attention to the racial discrimination which is happening amongst the same skin colour people

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except for different facial features. Here, in mu research I have found out that the visible physical differences have made the employers believe that they are racially different and thus better than the race of existing labourers.

The world is becoming smaller day by day all thanks to globalization. . We have come in contact with various cultures, our food habits have changed (Ghosh 2011). A pan Indian taste has developed (Nandy 2004). People are travelling around the globe and they are not averse to trying new dishes. Many television channels have come up showing recipes from the world which has made all these dishes a household name (Roberts 2004). Pasta, Noodles, Spaghetti, Tacos, Burgers, etc. all owe their popularity to globalization.

The demand for Chinese or Tibetan food has also increased in the same way. It has replaced many of the Indian snacks which were earlier the favourites of people. Some of the Indian snacks have also been modified to appease the Indian eaters (Nandy 2004). The 'Momo culture' have influenced the Indian food choice to an extent that people have come up with sayings such as 'Momo is the new samosa'. Chinese

cuisines have undoubtedly very smoothly placed themselves on a common Indian's table to an amount that it is sometimes more preferred than normal north Indian dishes. They have come up with new innovations and mixes to satiate their Indian taste buds3. To keep in pace with this ever increasing competition and meet the demands of the people, restaurant owners are employing various tricks and methods to build a strong customer base.

One of such tricks is employing a Nepali workers. Further below I have talked about various reasons how these workers benefit the employer. These themes are based on the accounts of employers and employees from various sectors of informal labour market especially the food industry.

2 Foods as a Symbol of Relatedness

Food of a place is symbolic to a particular place. It is not culturally neutral, it is tied strongly to the identity, culture, status. (Martini and Chee 2001). The customers generally are of this perception that people with mongoloid features have Chinese dishes as their staple food. The employers also derive benefits from this confusion. Ironically enough, even the employers cannot differentiate between a Chinese, a Tibetan, a Nepali or even an Indian citizen belonging the north eastern states.

Sakshi, a restaurant employer believes if she employs a chef from a north Indian state in her Chinese restaurant, they won't be able to cook the exact taste like a 'Chinese' person. In her words:

For cooking and all, I will choose Nepali because they have this art of cooking which an Indian can't obtain. The taste which comes from their hand, an Indian or a Bihari person can't acquire that taste even after trying hard. They have that magic, no one can learn it neither anybody can replace it. You yourself can sense the difference. They have their own style. They "catch" the taste. No matter whatever 'we' do, we can't get that Chinese touch. But let's talk of north eastern or the 'Chinese food'. Their food is very light. Like they always prefer salad, more non veg and even in non veg, they prefer less spicy and raw stuff unlike us, where we cook chicken like potato and same with Nepalis, they also have almost same food like them. This is their 'fooding habits'[4], their own culture of food. So no matter who cooks, Nepali, Chinese, Manipuri, the taste will remain the same. They are all the same. While making a Chinese dish, you do

n't need much things, you need some chopped up vegetables and few basic things, nothing extra. Since we are so much different why do you expect me to employ a Bihari migrant? I also have to run a business, earn money. I will choose who so ever suits me the best.

She wants to say resemblance to particular ethnic group ensures customers' goodwill as it matches with their belief that good Chinese food can be cooked only by Chinese looking people. Her point thus becomes valid as she wants to choose the best for her business and for that she chooses a Nepali migrant for the fact that they resemble Chinese people and thus good in making Chinese food items. The new found love for Chinese dishes have created turbulent times for the other migrants.[5] They have difficulty finding jobs, and even if they get one they don't have that much bargaining power left. They complain that many of their jobs have snatched and given to the 'new kind of migrants'. They agree that the Nepalis were present earlier also but they had a very limited options to choose a job from, like a watchman, a security guard, a house maid, even in the food sector, there were not many Chinese food joints so their employability was quite low but sudden increase in these restaurants, they are a very 'hot property' in the labour market. According to one of them, "*They are employed in fancy restaurants and we get jobs in a 'dhabha' now".*

Simant, in his late thirties blames this change in taste of the consumers for the loss of his job. He had a movable stall of 'dal kachori' which he had to shut down because of the decreasing demand. He now has a Momo stall at the outskirts of Delhi, where he does not have to compete with other Nepali migrants as they are almost none. He has employed his own set of workers from his village. He knows that for his business to succeed in the long run, he will have to employ a Nepali worker, but for him employing Nepali workers is not affordable.

Even though we have lost what we actually did but now we are also in this job now, people have started loving Momos, they have replaced 'samosas', they are the new 'pani puri', now people demand for it, when there is no Nepali selling in this area,

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I should make a use of it, like a good businessman. And as long as it is concerned is, I won't deny people will trust him over me, and why won't they? Tell me, if you had to eat dishes of our land 'Gatte ki subzi or sarso machchli (fish)' you would have come to us or gone there. This is not a rocket science. It's in our mentality. We trust the person who is an expert in that field. But since there is no Nepali here, I have established my stall, people who love Momos they come and eat. But you are right, had I been in an area, where a Nepali would have established this stall, nobody would have eaten mine, then I would be completely jobless. Dal kachori had no profit, I was reeling under loss and then I thought of establishing it. I don't know if the taste matches their level but I am the sole one here, so I have this advantage.

His words show that even though if any other person except than the people with mongoloid features would have tried selling the Chinese food items, they would have failed. He succeeded only because he established his stall in a place where he had no competition with the other Nepali migrants showing that people instantly attach value to the food based on the seller or the cook of that particular dish.

These incidents show that people attach a particular race with a particular food. We can infer from this that food shows the cultural traits of an ethnic community. It carries a collectivized identity of the whole community (Martini and Chee 2001). This works in the favour of these migrants. Most of their demand in Delhi is from the food and restaurant sector.

Since the Nepali migrants are more in demand, they are quoted at a higher price as compared to the Indian workers. Moreover they are not easily available and they have the cooking skills which Indians lack. Paying them higher wages would be more beneficial for the employer in long run, so they are often paid the price they ask. According to the Kushal, one of the employers, the reason for their high demand and thus higher price is Besides being a good cook, they also have other qualities which makes them desirable in a labour market. Such as they are very clean. We Indians are very holy, for us the kitchen is the abode of god. The Uttar pradeshi or the Bihari migrants are from schedule caste, though I don't believe in the caste system, but still you can sense it from the way they keep the kitchen. Moreover these Nepalis are very loyal. I have heard no complaints against them as long as I have been in this line. They don't take frequent leaves. They go for once and for a long time and since they have many brothers and relatives from the village, they generally employ one of them as a substitute.

These qualities in addition to their looks gives the Nepalis bonus points[6]. Here in this case of preferences, the earlier migrants have played a very important role. They have already created a niche for them and their future generations. The present generations do not have to strive hard to create that spot for themselves in labour market. They are immediately hired on the basis of their earlier built image.

3 "Nepalis are Fashion Conscious"

The location which I have chosen for my research was north Delhi which has major colleges of the Delhi University, thus it is populated mostly with students. The restaurant owner's primary concern is making their customers comfortable. They have their own different ways of drawing them to their eating joints. They prefer workers which are clean and attractive. This again gives Nepalis an upper hand since they are seen as 'cleaner and fashionable' and matching the mentality of students.

Manik khosla (28), owner of 'The Tin Town' in North Campus tells us the how fashion and style plays an important role in selecting the workers. In his words, I was also a student of Delhi University few years back so I know what fits the mentality of students. Opening a restaurant in a student dominated area means almost all your customers are students. So to meet my customer's sensibilities I prefer Nepali workers. They are fashionable. They are youthful, vigorous and unlike Bihari migrants they are not dull or unclean. Their charming attitude attracts more and more student. The students feel themselves in a comfortable environment where there is no one to judge them. There is a very little cultural shock and even if there is, they adjust themselves because for them works come first. The other migrants take time. The other day we had this girl who was wearing shorts. We had a new worker from Darbhanga (Bihar), he was staring continuously at her, making things awkward for her as well us. Even though we train them to act normal in such situations but as I told you, these guys take time, so it's better to employ their Nepali counterparts. Nepalis are more fashionable than us Indians, so they are quite chilled out and don't freak out when they see any girl in short dresses. Moreover, their contemporary fashion sense matches the style of students, so they don't feel they are among adults and they enjoy freely at this place. This helps me build customer goodwill.

Many employers share the same view as Manik's. They feel that Nepalis are more chilled out and adjusting to situation as compared to an Indian migrant.

The Nepali employees mostly had an undying attraction towards Bollywood and this is the reason they cited for being fashionable. They are ready to embrace the openness shown in movies and thus giving them preference as workers. On the contrary, the employers despise the workers from eastern UP and Bihar because of their slow adjustment to change.

4 Bracketing 'Them' into One and Creation of Fake Identities

It's very hard to believe but even the well-educated employers generally group all the people with mongoloid features into one single group- Nepalis and sometimes even 'Chinese'. The north eastern Workers are often dismayed that they are labeled

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as a completely different citizens but they are so tired correcting everyone that they now plan to make use of this confusion. This confusion has led many of them to fake their identities. The employers trust a particular race, thus they prefer them over the other Indian migrants. Migrants, on the other hand, also make sure that they achieve this trust by all the means.

Naresh, a twenty five year old worker tells us how he has been employed because he looks similar to a Nepali. He describes this situation as follows,

He thinks I am a Nepali but I am not. I am an Indian belonging to Darjeeling which is in west Bengal. But if he confuses me for a Nepali, I won't complain. This mistaken identity got me this job. He thinks I am from Morang (Nepal) because the previous person, who was employed here was from there. He employed me here as a substitute when he once went to home to celebrate. He is not back since then and I have become a permanent employee here.

I got this job because he think I am a Nepali. Even if I reveal my identity, I am sure I will get the same privileges as I get now. But why should I take a risk? I will earn peacefully and leave. If he asks me I might tell, but I won't because it will harm the relations of coming generations of employers with the Nepali migrants. Anyway don't I look Nepali? We look same, we have same culture. I can even speak Nepali very fluently. Nobody would even doubt me that I am not a Nepali.

I came across many similar accounts while doing my research. This established that the employers confuse them for Chinese and these people cleverly make an opportunity out of this confusion and get hold of high paying. Since employers generally trust Nepalis, faking that identity for the north eastern people becomes relatively easy.

This confusion has also brought these two communities closer. The North eastern community also have accepted them as their 'own' people. Pasang Gurung, a Nepali who owns a Momo stall in north campus feels he is much closer to a person from Manipur, just because they have same faces. His exact words were '*Hum dono ek jaise dikhte hai isliye hum bhai ho gaye hai'* which can be translated as 'we have similar looks therefore we are like brothers'. On imploring Pasang further on why he feels closer to the north eastern Indians, he added.

We look the same, our height is same, our skin colour is same, and we even have the same hairstyle. I don't look like the Delhi boys or the Punjabis, or people from UP or Haryana. They are tall, well built, we are little and cute. We are peace loving people, we are very soft spoken. Have you ever talked to us, will we ever be rude? Rudeness is unimaginable. These people, on other hand, use a lot abusive words while talking. We are physically different. We are mentally different. We can't ever mix with them, we mix with pahadis (hill people), they are like us, their language is also similar, dressing style is very much same, we are also up to date in fashion and so are they. We also eat the same food. Everybody confuses us to be brothers.

Pasang's closeness to north eastern people because of the uncanny resemblance to each other and the common culture is not just one way. It's equally reciprocated by the people from the north eastern states. This has also helped in building a strong social capital. They prefer to mingle with each other rather than making friends who do not look like them. His friend Bhupen who sits at a cloth shop just next to his Momo stall also said why he is closer with the Nepali migrant, and not with the Indian workers in his own shop.

I helped him settle the stall. I got him this place. I do his work when needed not just because we are friends, but because I am much closer to him than my own country citizens. They treat me as an outsider. They don't even know which state I am. They have nicknames. They call me 'Chinese' but I don't feel bad. They are not educated enough. But when people like you are confused about our nationality, we are hurt. Delhi is still adjustable to live but other Indian cities are hell for us. In Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, people haven't seen faces like us, so they are shocked to see us. We are aliens to them. Delhi has so many hill people, that nobody is conscious that I am different from you, or you are different from me. But if you even go to border of Haryana, people will start looking weirdly at. Their eyes clearly show that we are unwanted here and I am scared by those looks. Since we both are different from you, this has brought us closer. If we live with differences amongst each other, we can easily be beaten up by the north Indians. When Indians are not ready to accept us, I will seek refuge somewhere and I found that in him. At least I have someone who is by my side when needed.

The racial discrimination that is faced by both of them, Bhupen and Pasang have brought them closer to each other. As Bhupen also points out that their sufferings by the dominant groups have made them friends. It shows that many north eastern people find it easy to associate with the Nepali migrants rather other people of the same country and their closeness also has resulted in false perception amongst the employers and even the consumers that 'all are Nepali'. North eastern on the other hand don't mind themselves being classified as Nepali as long as they are getting secure incomes. Moreover, this classification also increases both Nepalis' and North Easterns' strength in numbers and gives them security and protection against harassment and exploitation.

The people with mongoloid feature are generally called different names such as 'chinky' on the basis of small eyes, or 'Pahadi'. They are generally stereotyped as 'momo wala' (Momo seller), 'chowkidar' (watchman) as they are stereotyped as watchmen. But this generalization is not limited to them.. Even they have generalized. For them, north Indians is bad, uncouth and uncultured specially the new generations. They are scared to befriend a north Indian person. This also justifies their closeness to the north easterns. According to them they are like 'us' and therefore they understand us. They still prefer Delhi because they already have their relatives working here or have already made a place for them. It's multicultural so they

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are still acceptable by the society. As Pasang adds, I will never go outside Delhi. Outside Delhi, it's all UP and Haryana, they are rowdy people. They don't know how to talk, I don't like UP, and they abuse us all the time. I went to UP with my Manipuri friend, they stare at us, and since there are no people like us, I feel alienated. They look at us weirdly, that scares us. Delhi has people from all the four corners, so this problem is little less. They can still bear us and even if there are these people who can beat us, but there will be some people who will save us. On the other hand, they are villager. They have no idea how to deal with people. They rear cow and buffaloes, so they don't know how to behave. They can be good with animals but not with us. Even if they come to my stall, they are rude but I try to deal with them as early as possible. What if they get angry and destroy my stall or beat me up, what will I do? It's better to get over with them, give them what they want and live your life peacefully. More you talk to them, they will become demanding, and consequently aggressive. In short, I can say they are ill mannered people living with animals and treating everybody as animals. We are peace loving and we don't get into Pasang perceives whole of the north Indian people as uncultured, rowdy and ill-mannered in the above statement. He feels that he is not acceptable in this country even though they have been migrating since a long time back. He finds solace in other people who look similar to him, like Bhupen who belongs to Manipur.

5 Conclusions

It's been fifty years since the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination has been adopted by the United Nations. However incidents of racism, racial discrimination, ethnic violence and religious intolerance are ever increasing at local, national and global level (Narang 2001). Very recent incidents have occurred at global as well as local level which also proves so. Such as beating up of two Nigerian students in national capital region of India by the mob as they stereotyped them as 'drug peddlers'[7] or people not preferring 'coloured people' as tenets in England because of a very whimsical reason that is 'they leave the curry smell behind'[8]. Shooting of Indian engineer in Kansas, United States had also been racially motivated as 'America belongs to white men'[910]. Similar racist incidents have been happening all over the world where the dominant race tries to overpower the other minority races and exclude them from the main society. However in India, these believed racial differences are working in favour of the Nepali migrants. In my research, I am nowhere endorsing the concept of race or racial differences but have tried to show how this social construction is acting as a catalyst in getting jobs and finding 'perfect' workers.

Apart from the reasons stated abovein the paper, I found out that their mongoloid features are also helpful to them in getting jobs. It's not out in open but it's subconsciously affecting their migrating decisions. Migration to India for them means a confirmed job in food industry especially in the field of Chinese cuisine industry because of their 'Chinese looks'. They possess all the qualities of an ideal worker such as honesty, loyalty, diligence, respecting the employer have brought them in the popular demand which also secures them job in other sector like construction industry, helper to shopkeeper and property dealers. These qualities are generally derived from the image that has been built for the Gurkha martial race. They are demanded over other migrants from the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and since they are comparatively less in number, they are paid more for their services.

I would like to mention that I don't believe in race as a biological construction but my respondents, the employer as well as employee still believe in race as 'visible physical differences' (Sole and Parella 2003). Even though in the twenty first century, they still have confusions and are unclear about the concept of race (Winant 2001). Interestingly enough the employers have bracketed the north eastern people and the Nepalis in the same group. It's hard for them to differentiate between a Nepali as well as a north eastern Indian. This racial confusion that is existing between the Indian employers and consumers is acting as a boon for the migrants and have given them an edge in getting work in the Indian society, thus adding one more reason as to why they prefer India over any other country to migrate and look for work. The race which was earlier used to overpower the ethnic minorities is now being used by the minorities for their own benefits.

In the end I would also like to add that this misbelief about race and using 'racial features' for their business is keeping the 'myth of race as a biological concept' alive.

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