



Challenges of North Eastern College Students in Chennai

Aswathy Sebastian

MSW, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai-8 , India

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the nuanced challenges faced by North Eastern students studying in Chennai colleges through the lens of focus group discussions. Participants candidly shared their experiences of social exclusion, perceived cultural discrimination, language barriers, and academic challenges. Initial challenges in forming friendships, coupled with feelings of isolation and an absence of a supportive network, underscored the complexity of their social interactions. Instances of discrimination, including derogatory comments and stereotypes, added layers to the intricacies of their experiences. Language barriers emerged as a significant hurdle, impacting academic communication and professional engagements. Academic challenges encompassed difficulties in meeting professor expectations and the added strain of financial responsibilities.

The findings, derived from qualitative data gathered through focus group discussions, underscore the multifaceted nature of the struggles faced by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges. The study recommends targeted interventions, suggesting cultural sensitivity training for faculty and students, mentorship programs for social integration, language support services, and comprehensive diversity and inclusion initiatives. The concluding reflection contemplates the broader question: Who is an Indian? What is an Indian? This philosophical inquiry prompts a reevaluation of our collective identity and the imperative for inclusivity. The study advocates for a transformative approach, urging colleges to actively address these challenges to cultivate a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students.

Keywords : North Eastern Students, Chennai colleges ,focus group discussion ,cultural discrimination ,social exclusion

INTRODUCTION

“In the face of challenges, we discover our inner strength and resilience”

The North East region of India which comprises eight states is known for its rich cultural diversity and distinct identities. Through the media we often find news about this beautiful place like a bomb blast, kidnapping etc, but they never talk about the beauty and kind-hearted people there. The main issue is that these people are facing racism in their own country, In most of the places these people are not treated well. However, people from this region often face stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in other parts of the country due to differences in appearance, language, and culture . their is a need of study and exploration into the challenges faced by north eastern students everyday and so many examples happening around it such as young guy named Nido Taniam was beaten to death in in the Lajpat Nagar area of Delhi, the reason he looked simply different in 2014. In 2016 two young guys from Mizoram were beaten in Bangalore for not speaking their local language . public places denying them entry just because they don't look Indian enough. They are told to prove their nationality. These people are not given jobs, house on the basis of their ethnicity or race. The problem is that we never talked about their culture, their stories and are not explored with the rest of India.

In the heart of Chennai's academic mosaic, a melting pot of cultures and backgrounds converges in a harmonious blend. The city, known for its warmth and inclusivity, stands as a beacon of hospitality for students from across the country. However, amid the broader tapestry of diversity, the experiences of North Eastern students reveal a nuanced narrative that necessitates careful examination. This paper embarks on a journey to explore the challenges encountered by North Eastern students in Chennai, recognizing the unique obstacles they face within the broader context of Indian society.

Chennai has earned its reputation as a welcoming haven for students from various states, fostering an environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds coexist and thrive. Yet, as we delve into the specific experiences of North Eastern students, a distinct pattern emerges—one that calls for a closer look at the challenges that uniquely affect this particular group .North Eastern students, wherever they go in India, often find themselves contending with prejudice and discrimination. The pervasive stereotypes, including misguided perceptions of their appearance resembling that of the Chinese, add an additional layer of complexity to their journey. This discriminatory lens through which they are viewed can become a source of distress, adversely impacting their mental and social well-being.

The challenges faced by North Eastern students are not merely academic but extend into the realm of their mental and social well-being. When students arrive for their studies, they are exposed to these challenges at a formative age, potentially influencing their overall growth and development. The need for understanding and addressing these challenges becomes paramount, as the impact on their well-being is a critical aspect of their educational journey

This paper seeks to uncover the multifaceted challenges faced by North Eastern college students, who study in various parts of Chennai offering a comprehensive examination of their experiences. The study through focus group discussions aims to explore the academic and social adjustment challenges they face everyday. By doing so, we aim to contribute to a discourse that not only identifies challenges but also advocates for a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tapologo Maundeni et al, (2014) in their study on Cultural Adjustment of International Students at an African University explored the cultural adjustment needs of international students enrolled with an African university. Participants were 33 students (males = 13, females = 20). They took part in-depth individual interviews and focus group

discussions on pertinent adjustment needs. Data gathered from the interviews were transcribed and content analysis was performed. The following challenges were found to affect the adjustment of international students to the host university. Language

problems, lack of social support networks, financial problems, xenophobia, difficulties associated with registration as well as role strain. This paper highlights the fact that often the adjustment of students who migrate from other countries is a tedious ongoing process rather than an experience.

E. Byrne et al (2019) did a study on “A melting pot of cultures’ –challenges in social adaptation and interactions amongst international medical students” explores the way in which cultural backgrounds impact the student’s experiences of an international medical school, and how these experiences have the potential to inform the development and design of student support services for those students who are not coping well with the transition. Three FGD were held among 33 students. Some of the challenges faced were difficulties with language, loss of established friendship networks. Other challenges to emerge in this study were the complex interrelatedness of the daily life challenges facing international students regarding the forming and importance of intercultural relations, which is impacted by gender, the presence of alcohol, languages spoken (in addition to English, which was the language used for medical education), and the dominance of the regional grouping the student belongs to.

Hulya Kosar Altinyelken (2009) in his paper titled Coping strategies among internal migrant students in Turkey did a qualitative study (interviews, workshops and focus group discussions) that explored educational challenges and coping mechanisms of internal migrant girls whose families moved from the rural areas in the east to the western parts of Turkey. The study revealed that internal migrant girls have encountered a number of challenges that influence their educational achievement at primary schools. From the

in the perspective of migrant girls, the emerging themes of the paper included adaptation, language, low socio-economic background, peer relations, discrimination, bullying and self-esteem. Furthermore, the study pointed at structural coping strategies, which were classified as achievement orientation, formation of solidarity groups, cloning identities, and withdrawal.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study holds paramount significance in unravelling the distinct challenges faced by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges, providing a nuanced understanding of their experiences outside their native regions. By delving into these challenges, the research contributes to the broader discourse on diversity and inclusion in higher education. The insights garnered not only inform educational policies, creating a more supportive environment for North Eastern students, but also empower their voices, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. Additionally, the study enhances cultural competence among educators and administrators, promoting a more inclusive campus culture. Addressing the impact on mental and social well-being, the research underscores the need for holistic support, advocating for the implementation of counselling services and mentorship programs. Moreover, this study serves as a catalyst for building bridges of understanding, fostering dialogue and empathy among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, ultimately striving towards a more harmonious and inclusive academic community.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To Assess the Social Integration experienced by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges
2. To Investigate linguistic difficulties faced by North Eastern students, particularly in academic settings, to identify specific language-related challenges and propose potential solutions.
3. To Explore Stereotyping and Discrimination based on cultural identity
4. To Evaluate the adequacy of Support Systems and Coping Mechanisms

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

The participants in this study comprised 16 North Eastern college students studying in prominent colleges across Chennai. The participants were purposefully selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age (ranging from 18 to 25 years), and the college attended. This intentional selection aimed to capture a range of perspectives and experiences among North Eastern students in the Chennai academic landscape.

Data Collection:

The primary data collection method employed for this study was Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Two FGDs were conducted, each consisting of eight participants. The FGDs were organised in a semi-structured format, allowing for both flexibility and consistency in the discussion. The open-ended questions posed during the FGDs were carefully framed to explore experiences within five broad categories: social exclusion, language barriers, perceived cultural discrimination, difficulty in expressing oneself in the classroom, and academic challenges.

The questions were designed to elicit participants' experiences and perspectives, providing rich qualitative data. Key questions included:

- Can you elaborate on specific instances where you felt challenged in navigating the existing social circles on campus? How did this impact your initial experiences in the college community?
- How did you navigate instances of perceived cultural discrimination, and were there support systems in place to address such issues?
- How difficult was to find friends in campus and any incidents in peer groups where you felt isolated
- What was the impact of language in your development and participation in college activities

The FGDs were moderated by a trained facilitator, ensuring a conducive environment for open and honest discussion. The facilitator guided the conversation, allowing participants to share their experiences freely. The moderation approach aimed to encourage participants to express their thoughts and feelings without judgement, fostering a collaborative and respectful discussion.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were made aware that their involvement was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any point without consequence.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis for this study will centre around major themes identified as a priority such as : social exclusion, perceived cultural discrimination, language barriers, and academic challenges. The coding process will involve systematically categorising participant responses into these overarching themes. A coding scheme will be developed to ensure consistency and accuracy in capturing relevant content related to each theme. Qualitative analysis will be primarily narrative, with a focus on exploring patterns and variations within and across the identified themes. The synthesis of findings will be organised around these major themes, forming the basis for the subsequent findings and discussion sections. The aim is to provide a detailed and contextualised account of participants' experiences within the predetermined thematic framework

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Social Exclusion: Navigating Friendships and Support Networks

The first significant theme that emerged from the focus group discussions revolves around the challenges of social exclusion faced by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges. Participants frequently expressed difficulties in forming friendships, particularly during their initial days on campus. They highlighted the presence of well-established social circles among local students, creating a perceived barrier for integration. This sense of social isolation was compounded by the absence of a supportive network and a lack of trustworthy friends.

One participant vividly captured the essence of this struggle, stating, *"I have been in Chennai for 5 years now, and I am still struggling to find friends who will genuinely care and consider us , all I am looking for is a meaningful connection ."* This poignant statement underscores the enduring nature of the participants' quest for authentic and supportive friendships within the college community.

The challenges extend beyond the quest for friendship to encompass feelings of isolation and loneliness reported by several participants. The pervasive sense of being alone on campus contributed significantly to their overall dissatisfaction with the college experience. Moreover, participants shared instances of exclusion from college clubs and peer groups, often attributing such exclusion to perceived cultural differences. This exclusionary dynamic further heightened their sense of alienation and hindered their full participation in the broader college community. Xenophobia was also singled out in the study , majority of them felt that the local students never liked them and are not friendly with them , respondents also mentioned that the local students had a tendency to use local language in group discussions

Perceived Cultural Discrimination: Navigating Stereotypes and Prejudice

The second key finding of the study delves into the theme of perceived cultural discrimination, shedding light on the experiences of North Eastern students who often felt scrutinised and treated differently based on their North-Indian cultural background. A prevalent concern voiced by participants centred around the noticeable stares and differential treatment they encountered on campus, contributing to a palpable sense of unease and alienation.

Beyond mere stares, participants reported instances of outright discrimination, including derogatory comments and reinforcement of stereotypes associated with their cultural background. One participant poignantly articulated the broader societal perception, stating, *"Inside and outside college, we are often treated as immigrants. They don't consider us Indians because they believe we don't have an Indian face. Some peers, even some faculties, refer to us as Chinese, as if we don't belong here."*

This sentiment highlights a deep-seated issue where the participants feel their identity is misconstrued and that they face challenges in being recognized as legitimate members of the Indian community. The use of stereotypes, such as associating them with a particular nationality based on physical appearance, reflects a form of cultural bias that exacerbates feelings of marginalisation.

One participant shared a distressing incident related to housing, narrating,

"The lady who owned the apartment thought I couldn't afford it due to my looks and judged my other friend as a prostitute."

This account underscores the real-world consequences of cultural discrimination, extending beyond the academic realm to impact even basic aspects of students' lives, such as finding suitable accommodation.

Language Barriers: Navigating Communication Challenges

The third key finding of the study illuminates the persistent challenges faced by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges due to language barriers. Participants commonly expressed difficulties in effectively communicating with professors, impacting their ability to seek academic support or clarification on course-related matters. This struggle was encapsulated by an undergraduate student who candidly stated, *"I am never able to fully open up my feelings because of the language barrier, so I fail to stand out in groups or even among my friends."*

The language barrier extended beyond the academic realm, as highlighted by a social work student recounting an incident during fieldwork. The student shared, "I had a client for casework, but I couldn't complete the casework since the client didn't understand my language. The lack of cooperation she had with me was because she didn't feel that I am an Indian." This poignant example underscores the broader consequences of language barriers, affecting not only academic interactions but also practical aspects of professional training and service delivery.

Cultural differences in communication styles further compounded the challenges faced by North Eastern students. Misunderstandings between students and professors were noted, adding an additional layer of complexity to their educational experience. This aspect of the language barrier goes beyond the literal translation of words, encompassing differences in non-verbal cues, expressions, and expectations regarding classroom interactions.

Academic Challenges: Negotiating Expectations and Role Strain

The fourth key finding sheds light on the academic challenges faced by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges, particularly concerning the expectations set by professors. Participants consistently expressed the struggle to meet these expectations, perceiving them as distinct from their prior educational experiences in North Eastern schools. Moreover, they highlighted significant differences in learning patterns between their previous academic settings and the curriculum followed in the South.

A notable dimension of the academic challenges involves financial struggles faced by some participants, compelling them to work part-time. However, despite their efforts, there emerged a discrepancy in both workload and compensation compared to their peers. Many participants mentioned experiencing role strain as both employees and students, navigating the delicate balance between academic responsibilities and employment.

A participant encapsulated this sentiment, stating, *"I feel very overwhelmed sometimes as I will be lagging behind my college group assignments since other teammates do not consider my difficulty in balancing academics and work."* This testimonial underscores the additional pressures faced by North Eastern students, not only in meeting academic expectations but also in managing competing demands on their time and resources.

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the inherent inequities in their part-time employment, where they were expected to work more than others but often received less compensation. This economic strain further exacerbates the challenges faced by these students, impacting their overall well-being and potentially hindering their academic performance.

SUGGESTIONS

In light of the challenges identified through the focus group discussions, several targeted suggestions emerge to enhance the experiences of North Eastern students in Chennai colleges:

1. Cultural Sensitivity Training:

Colleges should institute cultural sensitivity training programs for both faculty and students. These programs can cultivate an understanding of diverse backgrounds, fostering an environment where cultural differences are acknowledged and respected. By enhancing cultural sensitivity, colleges can mitigate instances of perceived discrimination and promote inclusivity.

2. Mentorship Programs:

Establishing mentorship programs is crucial to assist newcomers in navigating the intricacies of college life. Senior students can serve as guides, offering insights and support to newcomers, thereby facilitating a smoother transition and promoting social integration. Mentorship programs create a sense of community and provide a valuable resource for addressing academic and social challenges.

3. Language Support:

Recognizing the language barriers faced by North Eastern students, colleges should implement language support services. This can include language classes or tutoring sessions tailored to the academic context. Language support aims to empower students to communicate effectively with professors and peers, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

4. Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives:

Colleges must actively embrace diversity and inclusion initiatives to create a welcoming campus environment. These initiatives could involve organizing events, workshops, and activities that celebrate cultural diversity. By visibly promoting diversity, colleges send a strong message of inclusivity, fostering a sense of belonging among all students.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the experiences shared by North Eastern students in Chennai colleges, it is disheartening to acknowledge the profound challenges they face on a daily basis. The narratives revealed instances of social exclusion, perceived cultural discrimination, language barriers, and academic challenges that collectively form an intricate web of obstacles impeding their journey as students.

The experiences shared during the focus group discussions highlight the urgent need for change. It is a call to action for colleges to prioritise cultural sensitivity, embrace diversity, and foster an environment where every student feels valued and heard. The discrimination faced by North Eastern students is a stark reminder that our journey towards unity and equality is still a work in progress. The words of one of the respondents stated "*Who is an Indian? What is an Indian?*" which echoes the sentiment that our identity is a mosaic of varied cultures, languages, and backgrounds. It is pertinent to ask these questions not only as a reflection on the challenges faced by North Eastern students but as a broader introspection into our collective identity as Indians. The quote serves as a poignant reminder that, irrespective of our differences, our shared identity as Indians should be one of unity, inclusivity, and understanding.

REFERENCES

1. Maundeni, T., Malinga, T., Kgwatalala, D., & Kasule, I. (2010). Cultural adjustment of international students at an African university. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 20(1), 79-84.
2. Byrne, E., Brugha, R., & McGarvey, A. (2019). 'A melting pot of cultures'—challenges in social adaptation and interactions amongst international medical students. *BMC medical education*, 19(1), 1-14.
3. Altinyelken, H. K. (2009). Coping strategies among internal migrant students in Turkey. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(3), 174-183.
4. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/wakeup-india/why-northeast-india-face-racism-in-its-own-country-20390/>