



Negotiating Identities Through Food: Northeastern Migrants and Racism in Urban India

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Abstract. This study explores how cuisine, culture, and racism intersect in the everyday experiences of people from Northeast (NE) India in mainland Indian cities. The NE people are very distinct in terms of social-cultural, language, their lifestyle, food habit and ethnic identities from mainland India. However, their ‘looks’ often become the basis of their racialization, making them soft targets of racism and xenophobia, especially in urban spaces. Food, as an important marker of cultural identity, emerges as a significant site where racial stereotypes and social boundaries are produced and reinforced. The present study focuses on the local cuisine of Northeast India, and the construction of Northeastern identity as “outsider” in mainland Indian cities. The local neighbourhood in the city has constructed the stereotypical image through their own experience from the media of the Northeast people’s cuisine and other Southeast Asian countries. Methodologically, the qualitative approach was adopted in the study. Using snowball sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with Northeast migrants from mainland cities of India. The phenomenological framework has been used to understand the lived experience of Northeast migrants. The finding shows that racial stereotypes and prejudice are often linked to assumptions and stigma attached to food habits, which further deepen the racial othering processes and social exclusion. The study is important as it contributes to the understanding of food cuisine and racism in India, an unexplored dimension of everyday racism in urban mainland India.

Keywords: Racism, Northeast Indian, NE Cuisine, Lived Experience.

1 Introduction

Food has always been more than just what people eat; it is closely tied to social and emotional boundaries, culture, and belonging. Food carries cultural significance that transcends the plate, embedding memory and identity within everyday life. In a highly diverse society like India, food and identity have increasingly drawn attention, partic-

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ularly because food practices have become sources of social exclusion, stereotyping, and prejudice. This dynamic is especially visible in relation to traditional cuisines from Northeast (NE) India. Since the post-2000s, migration of NE youth to mainland Indian cities has accelerated in search of higher education and better job opportunities. However, alongside these movements, Northeastern migrants have faced discrimination based on their physical appearance, language, cosmopolitan urban outfit, and food habits. Racism in mainland cities is thus not communicated only through skin colour or language, but also through everyday culinary practices. In this sense, the issue is not just about food but the question of belonging.

1.1 Northeast: Food, Identity and Racialisation

The Northeast region comprises Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, which are marked by rich ethnic diversity, with each community possessing its own cuisine, rituals, and customs. Daily diets commonly include pork, beef, fish, fermented fish, bamboo shoots, herbs, and rice beer. These food practices are central to the cultural life of the region. Yet, in mainland India, they are frequently stigmatized as “strange,” “smelly,” or “uncivilized”. Despite the internal diversity of Northeastern communities and cuisines, there is a persistent tendency to homogenise people from the region as one category of NE, based largely on physical appearance. As a result, NE youth experience racialisation in urban mainland cities, where food becomes a visible marker and thus reinforces prejudice. For Northeastern migrants, foods such as axone (fermented soybeans) or smoked pork are not merely recipes, but carry memories of home, festivals, and cultural identity. In mainland cities, however, these same dishes often become grounds for exclusion. At the same time, food also operates as a means of resistance and belonging. In several parts of Delhi, Northeastern migrants have opened shops selling region-specific vegetables and herbs that are otherwise unavailable. Restaurants and fast-food outlets offering Northeastern flavours have also increased. Through shared meals and everyday interactions, migrants sometimes challenge stereotypes and create spaces for conversation. Meanwhile, others continue to cook in secrecy, continuing their food traditions despite dislike and hostility. The present study focuses on the role of traditional food cuisine in the formation of identity among Northeastern migrants in mainland Indian cities. It specifically examines how cuisine-based stereotypes contribute to everyday experiences of racism, while also shaping practices of belonging in urban spaces. The findings of the study show how food not only serves as a substance for racism but also an effective vehicle for resistance and identity construction. In addition, it also conveyed the sentiments of exclusion, the strength of cultural identity, and the inventive strategies that NE migrants use to counter prejudice.

2 Review of Literature

This section reviews existing scholarship on food, identity, migration and racism to situate the experiences of Northeastern migrants in mainland Indian cities. Several scholars have highlighted how food delineates social boundaries.

2.1 Sociology of Food and Identity

Douglas (2002) Food taboos as symbolic systems that reiterate notions of purity and pollution. Mintz et al. (2002) The relationship between culinary practices and cultural memories and histories. Further stated, for migrants, food gains more meaning as it serves as a home, a site of emotional comfort, and thus a means to have identity in a foreign country. Few diaspora scholars have demonstrated the close relation between food and identity in identity negotiations all over the world. (Ray 2004) South Asian immigrants in the UK and US follow to conventional foods as a means of cultural identity, while conforming to local norms.

2.2 Northeast Food Cuisine

Sharma (2022) In India, this is developed peculiarly for Northeasterners, whose unique cuisines, like fermented bamboo shoots (vegetable) or pork (non-vegetable), are both a source of comfort and stigma. McDuié-Ra (2012) Their similar physical appearance of “mongoloid” and of being East Asian and different cultural practices identify them as different, thus becoming a factor for racist remarks like “chinky”, chini, or small eyes, or that they are not Indian. Interestingly, food habits exacerbate racist remarks. Kikon (2022) Relates caste and race, and argue that the racism against NE is driven by notions of purity according to caste rules and thus marks the Northeastern cuisines as “dirty” or “smelly”. Further she argues that, religion is another important factor in understanding food habits and stereotypes. Individuals who consume beef or pork are against Hindu, Muslim, or Jain teachings in mainland cities. It is a religious difference that produces opinions, where their food is not only other but also immoral. Bhaumik (2015) Food like fermented fish or beef staples in some northeastern diets conflict with vegetarian standards and consequently render NE migrants subject to judgment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Northeasterners were stereotyped as linked to China, and even the racist remarks have changed from ‘Chinky’ to ‘Corona’, and ‘dirty virus’ during covid pandemic. In addition, racism against NE is expressed in name-calling, harassment, and even violence. In this context, the media has taken an important role in shaping those perceptions against NE. Haokip (2021) For instance, movies, reels, blogs, etc., in various social media platforms and even news reports tend to exoticize Northeastern cuisine, labeling it as “unusual” or highlighting extreme cases, like consuming snakes. This portrays a wrong impression that all Northeasterners consume “weird” food, which leads to prejudice.

2.3 Gender and Racism

Gendered stereotypes are an important experience faced by NE women compared to men. Research indicates NE women are being regarded as “exotic” or “loose,” alongside food-related insults. Haokip (2021) A NE woman may experience racism for preparing fermented fish, but she also handles gendered stereotypes like being regarded as “available,” sexually, which brings about harassment. This dual burden leads to urban living being especially challenging for NE women, who do not feel safe in public or at work. In general, a city such as Delhi is always more expensive when it comes to rent. Poorer-class NE migrants, such as students or low-wage workers, are likely to stay in lower-priced rentals. Page and Pande (2018) The trends of housing inequality hit harder for the poorer, who are unable to afford to live in more expensive areas where restrictions may be fewer. Therefore, individuals who come from more affluent backgrounds, they usually live in neighbourhoods where there are fewer restrictions when preparing their preferred food. Indeed, class is also an element to escalate discrimination. Anthias (2013) The intersecting identities, such as race, region, class, and gender, create “hierarchies of belonging”. Consequently, Northeastern migrants are typically placed below in India’s social hierarchy owing to these factors. This results in reinforcing stigma and exclusion of NE people. The food habits of NE people, like consuming fermented fish, pork, bamboo shoots, or beef pickle, are frequently presented as “uncivilized” or “dirty,” making them outsiders in Indian cities. Owing to these, complaints by rent owners, neighbours, or stereotypes in workplaces are very common, and it is also being questions of their own culture.

Racism against Northeasterners is becoming a big concern. From the above existing body of literature, food is not just a matter of consumption but a powerful indicator of social boundaries, cultural identity, and belonging. Unfortunately, the issue of racism against NE people has been paid less attention in public academic discourse. Though food is considered a site of discrimination, there is a limited sociological study that highlights food and racism as a central theme of analysis. Secondly, there is insufficient analysis examining how the intersection of caste, class, gender, and religion jointly operates through food practices. In addition, the role of food habits in reinforcing gendered vulnerability and moral policing remains ignored by Indian academia. Thus, the present study attempts to bridge the gaps by focusing on food as a central analytical lens to understand the racism, stigma, and exclusion experienced by NE migrants in mainland Indian cities. By integrating stigma theory and intersectionality, the study aims to demonstrate how local food habits produce everyday forms of exclusion and reinforce hierarchies of belonging. Hence, the present study questions the norms prevailing by marginalizing NE people based on their food habits.

3 Theoretical perspective

The study adopts a phenomenological approach to understand how racism is lived, felt, and negotiated by NE Indian youths in mainland Indian cities. Some important sociological perspectives were used, which help in the analysis. The Critical Race Theory (CRT), symbolic interactionism, and Frantz Fanon’s colonial identity and internalized racism helped understand the food, identity, and racism. Frantz Fanon’s

(1967; 1991) notion of the “epidermalization” of inferiority is particularly relevant for understanding the ways NE people are racialized within a nationalist imagination that privileges certain cultural, food habits, and ‘physical looks’ as the norm. In addition, Goffman’s (1963) concept of stigma helps explain how individuals negotiate racism in everyday social interactions. People from the NE, because of their distinct phenotypical features, accents, cultural practices, and cuisines, are often perceived as “outsiders,” which leads to acts of racial discrimination. The phenomenological reality of “Otherness” and racism in the context of NE India is thus experienced and articulated through symbolic meanings attached to national identity. Thus, this racialized identity is closely associated with geopolitical marginalization, cultural difference, and phenotype-based exclusion. These perspectives are useful as it captures and interpret both the structural and lived dimensions of racism in India. The macro perspective of CRT provides the broader historical context of racial stratification, cultural dominance, and imagined nationalism that normalises certain food habits, culture, and physical appearances. Further, Fanon’s perspective provides an analytical insight into how, within this nationalist imagination, certain food habits and cultural practices are considered outside of this nationalist framework and marked as ‘other’. The understanding of the ‘othering’ process has been deepened with micro level perspective of symbolic interactionism, where racialised meanings are symbolically not just produced but negotiated and resisted in the everyday experience of NE migrants in Mainland Indian cities.

4 Methodology

The qualitative approach was adopted in the study, and using in-depth interviews, the data was collected from 42 participants of NE migrants who are currently engaged with college education, working in shops, malls, and beauty salons, and including other youths working in different corporate sectors. These participants are aged between 20 and 36. The data was collected from different mainland cities of India, especially New Delhi and Chandigarh. These two cities were particularly selected because they attract a significant number of NE migrants for education, job placement, and better livelihood opportunities. Despite educational and job opportunities, Delhi is often reported as a site for racism. The data was collected during February and March 2025.

A snowball sampling technique was used to ensure the inclusion of individuals from different states of NE. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The study focuses specifically on the personal narratives of North-Eastern youth. In the present study, NE has been put as one category for the analysis of their racial experience in mainland India despite their ethnic diversity. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all the participants; names were anonymized so as to maintain confidentiality.

5 Food Identity and Racism: An analysis

This research is concerned with the life of Northeastern migrants in urban India focusses on the food habits and contemporary racism that has recently emerged in the public scholar's debate, which had been ignored for a long period of time. Interestingly, the culinary traditions of NE, which are rooted in cultural identity has transformed into sites of racism, exclusion, and resistance in Indian cities. The Northeast Indian, consisting of eight states, is characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, which is frequently relegated to the margins of the wider Indian discourse because of its geographical marginalization, political and cultural distinctiveness from the Indian mainland. Baruah (2008) The people of all the NE states have some phenotypical similarities, and this develops a category of 'North-Eastern looks. Thus, the 'category', 'North-East', becomes a racial category to show the difference from the imagined land of India nation. Thus, the physical features and culture of NE often become the basis and evidence of their racialization, making them soft targets of racism and xenophobia, and it becomes everyday racism faced by migrants from North-East India in metropolitan cities. The scope of economic and educational opportunities since the 1990s has pushed significant migration of Northeasterners to urban areas. Karam (2019) The process of migration has been accelerated since 2000. But such migrants are not only often subjected to racial discrimination, as in slurs such as "chinky" or "dog-eater," based on stereotypes about looks, language, and food preferences. Food becomes an issue of a point of dispute, food items such as *axone* (fermented Soya beans), *ngari* (fermented fish), beef, or pork are bringing about a criticism of 'smelly' or 'unclean' habits. The research explores how the practice of food, the mundane, everyday activity that everyone engages in, is both a part of and is struggling against much more significant patterns of exclusion, opening a door onto the boundaries of eligibility of the Indian sense of multiculturalism and the persistence of migrant communities. It fulfils a need for greater knowledge about the transformation of everyday cultural practices into the fields of contestation over different issues of identity and belonging in a diverse but stratified society.

5.1 Food as a Marker of Otherness

There is a deep importance of food to the construction of the experiences of Northeastern migrants in India's urban centers. For the majority of respondents, food was the first and most immediate conflict of their new city lives. Food labeled them "different" immediately and makes them feel shame or tension in their everyday lives.

One respondent stated: "When I cooked *axone* in Delhi in my apartment, I used to hear that from my nearby neighbours about 'bad smell'. They told the landlord about how I was filthy. In the end, I was forced to abandon cooking *axone* at my rental home." Similarly, a Mizo man in Mumbai described how his colleagues made a 'face' when smelling his smoked dried fish and called it 'rotten'. Thus, later, I had to eat alone."

This day-to-day experience of food is familiar to Douglas's understandings of purity and pollution, in which mainland Indians were prone to associate the Northeastern

foods with dirt, immorality, or savagery. Hence, taking home-cooked lunch to work place results in stares or comments that further validate their outsider status. This has created an awkward situation of Northeasterner and leads to gradual isolation and an experience of not belonging.

These examples of lived experience show the way food has served as a symbolic border. It also reveals that the neighbours and landlords use it to uphold “civic” norms that are purely based on the normalization of mainland food and, in fact, an obfuscation of racism.

Several similar experiences have been shared by respondents. One of the best-known incidents was the case of a Northeastern student in New Delhi who was physically targeted by her landlord, objecting to her preparation of ‘smelly’ food that later happened to be a Naga food with fermented fish. The complaint of the landlord rose to violence, and there were even protests from the Northeastern communities.

A 24-year-old Mizo student in New Delhi shared her experience, “I brought some dried bamboo shoots from home to make *bai* (a Mizo stew). My roommate said it smelled like ‘garbage’ and told all her friends at the hostel. Now I just cook when there is no one around, but I feel like I’m living a secret life and hiding who I am.”

Based on the above cases, stereotyping and stigmatization, including mental harassment, are commonly experienced in daily life by NE migrants. Smell becomes the cat’s paw of racialized violence in the various situations depicted, through obsessive dramatization of a relationship in which the immediate neighbour becomes the enabler of cultural homogeneity, in which sense of ‘smell’ is appropriated as the agent of enforced consumption. The incident was also used to fuel larger conversations about racism within the system, which helps illustrate how stigma over food directly leads to harm to one’s body.

5.2 Racism and Exclusion in Cities

Indian society, especially the Hindu caste system, is deeply rooted in hierarchization and leads to discrimination against the lower caste and other sections of society. So, stereotypes, exclusion, or discrimination are internalized and traditionally normalized based on the norms of purity and pollution in many socio-cultural contexts. Thus, understanding the context of racism upon NE is another yet new and important dimension in the academic debate of what is accepted and what is not, and what is pure and what is not! It is commonly shared by the respondents that they have been referred to as “dog-eaters” or “snake-eaters” in workplaces and universities. Interestingly, friends and colleagues often jokingly call or use such remarks to NE people without realizing that they are stereotypical.

A Manipuri young woman who is working in one of the MNCs in Delhi stated that, “At the office canteen, office friends always ask me whether I am eating something strange. They laugh, thinking it is a joke, but it is painful. I never ask them why they eat paneer daily.”

Kumar (2025) The discourse of “strangeness” reinforces stereotypes, deeming ordinary cooking habits a symptom of otherness. This racism is acted out in the public arena, such as offices, schools, and markets, where food is used as a means of exclu-

sion. Azeez, et al. (2022) During Covid-19 pandemic, it escalated as participants explained being shunned as “virus carriers” since their appearance and food were associated with China, with stalls being boycotted. This “othering” is not merely words but turns into isolation, such as staying away from group lunches so as to avoid remarks. Tajfel, (1986) Consequently, this forces migrants to form support groups of their own based on common food habits and social identity. Thus, a belonging of commonness. The role of the state, rather than helping these marginalized NE migrants it instigates the situation of food-related racism. The Telegraph India (2007) The booklet of Delhi Police in 2007 came out and asked Northeasterners not to eat “smelly” food to avoid “no ruckus”, a glaring institutional manifestation of racism.

A 30-year-old IT professional hailing from Assam and who works in Chandigarh reported, “In the office, they asked me if I eat insects since you are from the Northeast. One time, I took thukpa (noodle soup), and I was called ‘Chinese.’ Now I only eat bread to prevent questions.” Such cases reveal how everyday stereotypes push migrants to suppress or defend their cultural identities, thereby unsettling their sense of belonging. They also point to a subtle yet powerful form of institutional indifference, where racism is dismissed or normalised under the guise of neutrality and “harmless” behaviour. A similar experience was highlighted by a respondent who is pursuing Postgraduate in Delhi University during the data collection. “We used to either avoid our food or avoid other people during meal time! Because of seniors mocking us in the college dining hall and identifying us as ‘stinky’. Likewise, Northeastern females in Chennai were thrown out after neighbours called their fermented bamboo shoot “shitty” to conflate it with pollution. These are all examples of how food racism is accepted, sometimes free-wheeling.

The above narration shows how NE people have led to a situation of self-censorship where students would give up some cultural pride for the sake of acceptance in terms of eating “neutral” foods like rice and dal. These cases depict the everyday participation of a site of education or workplace aimed at fostering inclusion results in the reproduction of exclusion through food bullying. The incident demonstrates how food stigma fueled by media discourses resulted in economic and emotional losses, solidifying migrants’ outsider status.

5.3 Intersectionality of Race, Culture, and Class

Food discrimination intersects with class, gender, and culture. Social class is an important dimension in understanding food and racism. This shows the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion. The urban nature of dwelling shows the dynamic of stereotypes and exclusions. And thus, who stays at what place is a matter of concern in the discussions of food and racism.

Students and poor workers paying cheap rents in small rooms were exposed to controls over their cooking. There is a surveillance on what to cook and what not to. In contrast, wealthy migrants in gated communities had received fewer complaints from neighbours. Debbarma (2016) This illustrates how class intervenes between the amount of culinary freedom. Interestingly, women had additional layers associated with food, stereotype and racism. NE women are often faced with food-related har-

assessment and charges of being a “loose” character. Thus, NE women are more vulnerable than men. This has been observed from the present study. Therefore, intersectionality shows how racism is not singular, but rather it intersects with gender as well.

Religion as an important component of culture is important in the analysis of food politics. For Kikon (2015), religion is an important basis of tension when Christian or indigenous religions use beef, conflicting with Hindu beliefs. Lee (2017) This creates “hierarchies of belonging”, with Northeasterners positioned lower. Poor Naga laborer in Delhi was evicted for preparing pork curry, whereas a richer Manipuri in an upscale apartment in the same city had no problems. Likewise, incidents have been highlighted from the present study; the following are some of the cases experienced by the respondents. These provide a thorough description of the analysis of food and racism.

A 27-year-old woman who hails from Meghalaya and works in Chandigarh during our study shared her experience, “My land-owner told me no beef because it’s ‘sinful.’ Then he commented on what I was wearing, telling me I’m not in a ‘decent dress’. It’s as if my food and my identity are both being attacked.”

The above statement portrays the intersection of gender and racism, the double burden of gender and cultural stigma. In addition, it depicts how women are subjected to reinforced challenges, combining racism and misogyny. This situation shows how food-based discrimination becomes stronger when class and religious beliefs are involved. It also shows that, because of poverty, many migrant workers cannot resist or speak against such unfair treatment.

6 Findings: Everyday Identity Negotiation

Facing discrimination for their food, Northeastern migrants developed several adaptive systems manifesting in their various ways of eluding the acts of hostility, while at the same time maintaining their cultural identity, a delicate balance of existence and pride. Adaptive strategies ranged from cooking late at night so as to avoid complaints from neighbours, using exhaust fans to mask the smell, or ordering food items such as fermented fish or bamboo shoots online in order to avoid local scrutiny. McDuire-Ra, (2012); Kikon, (2020) Migrant dominant areas, such as the community kitchen in Humayunpur in Delhi, comprised similar communities that publicly cooked group-specific food like axone, ngari, or smoked pork that would build group kindness and favor solidarity. Purveen (2020). Some of these culinary competencies were shared virtually through online groups like Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram, becoming virtual safe havens for recipe sharing, storytelling, and advice on finding ingredients, enriching cultural identity, and alleviating feelings of loneliness. Arcadu, (2025) Against the stigmatization, some migrants bridge co-workers or friends who are not from the Northeast, and share their cooking with them, which changes the prejudice into awareness and education opportunity, which is also in correspondence with re-claiming stigmatized identities. However, to others, silence was the choice, hiding their cooking habits to avoid confrontation, which had effective costs, such as an estrangement from home and from self, which is compatible with phenomenological

descriptions of lived experience. These ways reflect the strength and the emotional baggage of navigating food-based racism while migrants struggled to balance accommodation and resistance to maintain some sense of self.

In a few places of Delhi, such as Murnirka, the Northeastern migrants created a colourful food system with their home-based dishes. Devi and Barman (2025) This food cart became a favourable enclave in which migrants could express themselves freely, prepare food, entertain a diverse range of customers, and even contradict stereotypes about their cuisine. By this not only helped build a sense of pride but also gained positive media attention, which helped raise awareness and normalize Northeastern cuisines within the food fabric of Delhi.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, the Facebook group called *Northeast Foodies (NWF)* emerged as an important support system for Northeast migrants living in Delhi. Members shared recipes of familiar dishes such as smoked pork or *tungtap*, posted photographs of home-cooked meals, and exchanged practical tips on sourcing ingredients like dried bamboo shoots through online vendors. Beyond food exchange, this social media community functioned as a shared cultural space where migrants recreated a sense of home, belonging, and emotional comfort at a time of physical isolation and uncertainty. Thus, Northeastern immigrants in urban India walked a tight rope between accommodative conformity to mainline norms and cultural continuity through food. They altered recipes, such as diluting fermented pastes or substituting milder spices to minimize aromas, or avoided preparing some foods altogether to avoid confrontation with neighbours or landlords. However, for others, preserving cooking traditions was an absolute no-holds-barred, since their foods were inextricably linked with memories of home, family, celebration times, and happiness.

The negotiation here is a function of phenomenology's concern with the lived, inherited in the recall of an enjoyable past taste that evokes nostalgia or the suffering of cultural repression with having to conceal or transform these practices (Husserl, 1970). Food emerged as an active space of both compromise and resistance, where migrants both resisted conforming to society's expectations and projected their identity, turning both possible spaces of stigma into processes of hidden or open resistance as Goffman stated.

7 Conclusion

The food-based racism was widespread in mainland Indian cities, yet institutions such as universities, workplaces, and housing societies hardly touched upon it. Participants registered the absence of policies safeguarding dietary diversity or programmes to teach about cultural differences. This silence normalized prejudice, leaving migrants to handle discrimination alone, which took not only social but also psychological aspects. The absence of institutional support contrasts with the need for systemic change, like workshops or inclusive policies, to combat racism.

Our research shows the intense significance of food habits as a trigger for racism as well as a site of powerful resistance for Northeastern migrants in urban India. It also portrays the complexity of identity negotiation in a so-called multi-cultural country.

These empirical cases of lived experiences reveal how caste, religious, and regional prejudices drive discrimination. Despite numerous hardships, NE migrants continue to show strength through certain coping mechanisms and resistance just to preserve their identity and belonging. For example, the Assamese food market in Pune transformed unfavorable perceptions, small Mizo cooking networks in Delhi, and Mumbai's "Taste of Manipur" educates clients about local culture. These cases of racist remarks and discrimination indicate food may also act as a cultural bridge, allowing migrants to maintain their identity and acquire respect. Therefore, it is the need of the hour that promoting inclusion through education, fair urban policies, and cultural awareness can further strengthen understanding and harmony among diverse communities.

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