



## RESEARCH NOTE

# Perceived Discrimination of Old Settlers in Sikkim

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### ABSTRACT

The old settlers in Sikkim are a community of mainland Indians whose ancestors had settled at least 15 years before the merger with India in 1975. At present, the total population of the community is less than three thousand individuals, comprising various ethnicities. This qualitative study focuses on the perceived discrimination of the old settlers, who form a demographic minority in the state. Data was collected using telephonic interviews from a sample of 11 old settlers. Thematic analysis indicated racial differences between the northeastern indigenous community and mainland Indian old settlers as a major reason for perceived discrimination. The participants expressed the experience of negative emotional reactions, such as anger and disappointment, when they faced discrimination. The participants also felt betrayed by the government of India because they did not

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receive adequate protection for their rights when their identity in Sikkim changed from foreigners to citizens. Reactions to discrimination included migrating out of the state, experiencing negative emotions such as anger, disappointment and fear, and learned helplessness.

**KEYWORDS**

discrimination, Sikkim, race, old settlers, perceived discrimination, Northeasterners

**Introduction**

The Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament in India) Committee on Petitions in 2013 acknowledged that the Government of Sikkim had passed multiple laws that discriminated against a community known as the old settlers (Committee on Petitions, 2013). The Rajya Sabha committee suggested the state government take affirmative action and protect the old settlers as they are the racial minority in the state (Committee on Petitions, 2013; Thatal, 2015). The committee mentioned that the old settlers in Sikkim are treated as “second class citizens in their own state” (Committee on Petitions, 2013). This acknowledgement of discrimination against the old settlers is important in providing validation to the feelings of the disenfranchised group. However, the perspective of the old settlers and attribution made by them concerning their discrimination experience requires deeper analysis.

Since the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975, many welfare schemes, such as exemptions from paying income tax, scholarship funds, land purchasing regulation, and healthcare facilities have been provided to the domiciles of the state (Income Tax Department, 1961; Land Revenue & Disaster Management, 2011; Law Department of the Government of Sikkim, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Malu, 2019). Domicile status in Sikkim is provided only to the former subjects of the king per the Sikkim subject regulation, 1961 (Home Department of the Government of Sikkim, 1995). However, before the merger, 400 Indian families, known as old settlers, had lived in Sikkim but did not become Sikkim subjects. Since these individuals are not registered as Sikkim subjects they are not considered to be domiciles of the state. At present, these families have had a settlement history of more than 75 years in Sikkim (Thatal, 2015). Despite their length of settlement, the old settlers are not considered domiciles and are ostracized from availing many of the aforementioned welfare facilities. Their status in Sikkim is that of outsiders since they are not part of the indigenous ethnic groups and belong to various mainland Indian communities such as Biharis, Marwaris, Bengalis, Punjabis, and Malayalis.

In the Indian context, race-based discrimination is considered a phenomenon that occurs against Northeasterners when they migrate to the mainland cities of India (Sohi & Singh, 2015). Several studies have attributed this experience to different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic systems (Hutchison et al., 2007; Sitlhou & Punathil, 2017;). Further, the Northeasterners in mainland India are a minority with limited socio-economic or political power and experience discrimination.

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In Sikkim, however, the demographic situation is reversed where the Northeasterners form the majority and the mainlanders comprise the minority (McDuié-Ra, 2015). As such, the mainlanders in Sikkim, and the Northeasterners in mainland India, are discriminated due to similar reasons such as being the demographic minority, and having different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic systems. Further, based on the conclusions drawn by the Rajya Sabha committee on petitions, the mainlanders are treated as second class citizens in the state (Committee on Petitions, 2013). Several theories of intergroup conflict support this conclusion.

The social identity theory states that intergroup conflict can result from the minimal group paradigm where the separation of people into groups is enough for in-group preferential treatment to occur (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The creation of identity differences such as locals vs old settlers or Northeasterners vs mainlanders would result in such conflict. Further, the realistic group conflict theory states that if groups compete for resources such as land, labour, or gold, then intergroup conflict would also occur (Sherif, 1966). The old settlers, and the locals in Sikkim, are competing for resources. Based on these theories and the position of the old settlers as a minority or non-dominant group, it can be discerned that discrimination occurs against the old settlers in Sikkim. However, the perception of such discrimination and the reasons they attribute to it requires deeper analysis.

Perceived discrimination is considered as a psychosocial stressor, linked with many negative effects such as higher stress levels, anxiety, depression, hostility, psychoticism, and higher dropout rates (Okazaki, 2009; Ong et al., 2013; see, Dion & Kawakami, 1996; Ramiah et al., 2010). Experiences of discrimination can lead individuals to appraise themselves as targets leading to higher threat perception. Stress is further compounded as discrimination experiences are unpredictable, leading to greater adaptation costs. Further, discrimination may not always result from belonging to oppressed groups and any arbitrary characteristic, when used to perpetuate discrimination, can lead to higher stress levels. Similar conclusions have been found in the studies among visible minorities such as the Chinese in Canada, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians in the USA (Crocker & Major, 1989; Dion, 2002).

According to the attribution viewpoint, individuals experiencing discrimination are in a dilemma in ascribing the reasons for their negative experiences. To explain the experience, they either decide that the source is prejudiced against them due to their group membership or the experience was due to a personal failing. These evaluations affect their understanding of the self and can cause negative self-assessment and decreased self-esteem (Jiloha, 2010; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; Panchanadeswaran & Dawson, 2011). These self-evaluations can also lead to positive buffering effects on the victim when they attribute it to their group membership. For instance, an experiment by Dion (1975) on women in Canada showed that participants who thought they were competing against men felt higher levels of prejudice and identified more with female stereotypes than those who believed they were competing with women. Results indicated that individuals show increased identification with existing in-group stereotypes while perceiving discrimination from an out-group, attempting to buffer

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negative effects on self-esteem. The strength of these positive buffering effects varies across groups.

Considering the paucity of literature around race-based discrimination occurring within northeast India and the importance of understanding the discrimination experiences of visible minorities, we sought to understand the perceived discrimination of old settlers in Sikkim. Old settlers in Sikkim were focused on due to the acceptance of discrimination by the upper house of parliament and the unique citizenship situation in Sikkim. The study findings would also create an understanding of racial discrimination in India in a bi-directional manner, where demographic and political strength are important variables to consider while understanding discrimination.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

The sample included eight men and three women, old settlers from Sikkim. The total number of old settlers in Sikkim is less than 3000. Among the participants, six were senior citizens (above 65), four were in their early adulthood (20–40), and one was in their middle adulthood (40–60). According to the prevailing demographic situation of the old settlers, the number from each community was proportioned, where eight participants belonged to the Marwari community, two from the Bihari community, and one from the Punjabi community. Six participants were business owners, two were salaried employees, two were retired workers, and one was a homemaker.

### ***Data Collection***

The data used in this study was a part of doctoral research work on racial discrimination in Sikkim. The Institutional Review Board approved this study. Data was collected using telephonic semi-structured interviews. Before the interview, the investigator informed each participant about their rights and gave a brief overview of the study and its implications. The interview started after obtaining verbal consent to collect data. Interview guides in English and Hindi were developed and validated by three experts from the field. Questions posed included queries on their understanding of discrimination, perception of being discriminated and probable causes. Seven participants gave the interview in Hindi and four in English. Each interview lasted 30–50 minutes and was transcribed by the first author. The transcribed interviews were sent back to the participants for their perusal. These were considered for the analysis only after their confirmation of the content. Before the analysis, the first author translated the interviews from Hindi into English.

### ***Analysis***

Thematic analysis was employed as the study required the development of previously unexplored aspects. Three authors independently coded the transcribed interviews. Basic, organizing and global themes emerged after assessing similarities between the codes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The second author functioned as an objective assessor of analysis, and only after consensus amongst all the authors the themes were finalized.

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### ***Trustworthiness***

In studies with sensitive populations, trustworthiness is essential (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nelson, 2008). Keeping this in mind, audit trails of the study methods and procedures were continually conducted by subject matter experts to ensure the confirmability of the research. Independent coding and construction of the themes by the authors were done to enhance the trustworthiness further and ensure investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Confirmability, dependability, and credibility of the research were maintained by triangulation. The member check strengthened the confirmability and credibility. The first author is a part of the old settlers and continually engaged in reflexivity that helped avoid the biases.

### **Results**

The results revealed 13 basic themes, two organizing themes, and one global theme.

Perceived reasons included insecurity and threat, racial differences, prejudice and outsider status, revenge, democracy and minority politics, divided community, fear, and locals and politics.

### ***Racial Differences***

The racial division between the old settlers and the locals formed a major reason for discrimination. The old settlers claimed that all Northeasterner featured individuals are considered locals, even though many individuals from that group are not Sikkim subject holders.

When I say about old settlers, there are Marwari, Bihari families also and there are few people from Nepalese origin also who have been staying in Sikkim for the past, maybe 30-40-50 years also and they are not the subjects. But what happens is that they mingle around easily because of their face cutting however, we are segregated because of our face cutting. (SN, personal communication, April 10, 2020)

### ***Insecurity, Jealousy & Perceived Threat***

Participants claimed that the locals felt insecurity and threat in the presence of old settlers. This insecurity stemmed from the fact that the old settlers are economically competent. Threat perception resulted from the racial similarity between old settlers and mainland Indian politicians. “When you engage in business activities and are successful and earn money [...] some people feel jealous. They say that these people (mainlanders) have come from outside and captured our trading and business opportunities” (AB, personal communication, May 21, 2020).

### ***Prejudices and Outsider Status***

The participants believed that the state’s indigenous population did not accept them. Irrespective of the length of settlement, they were considered outsiders.

There is this big prejudice against our community that we were outsiders and that we came from outside, and we came here to rob the people or something like that [...] They feel that we guys are robbing them or we've been robbing them for years. (AA, personal communication, August 9, 2020)

### ***Revenge***

Many locals who migrate to other parts of India for education or employment purposes face discrimination. When they return to Sikkim, they discriminate against the old settlers as revenge.

When these people go down to the plains, they do face discrimination. So, when they come back, they also have that feeling that when we are in the plains, we face all these things, so they try to give it back. (BB, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

The participants also acknowledged that not all locals who return have revenge on their minds and become more sensitive after returning from the mainland with better education.

### ***Democracy, Politics & Minority Status***

Participants also acknowledged that the merger of Sikkim with India and the introduction of democracy created more problems for the old settlers. As a minority with less than three thousand votes, the old settlers make no difference in the political landscape. "Democracy is a numbers game, and our numbers here are very less. We are settled here but our numbers are less and therefore, discrimination is taking place against us" (AB, personal communication, May 21, 2020).

### ***Divided Community***

All the participants commonly agreed that old settlers were not united. They were weak in supporting each other when a need arose. "We have not yet learned how to stay together as a community. In fact, if we did stay together as a community, we could have procured for ourselves some sort of decent rights and all of that" (AA, personal communication, August 9, 2020).

### ***Fear***

The participants stated that they fear taking a stand against discrimination experienced as they have led to unfortunate consequences in the past. "We are scared also. Even if we want to, we can't go and fight. They are in such high numbers and we are so small. We can't do it" (BU, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

### ***Locals and Politics***

The participants held that the people of Sikkim were not prejudiced, but the politics of polarization created this situation. "The people of Sikkim are with us. They did not do this. Nor did the King. It was the Government and their people for political gains" (PT, personal communication, April 11, 2020).

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### ***Reactions to Discrimination***

When faced with discrimination, the participants reacted in multiple ways. They included feeling negative emotions, feeling of statelessness, betrayal from the central government, learned helplessness and out-migration.

### ***Negative Emotions***

Participants felt negative emotional reactions such as anger and disappointment due to discrimination. The impact lasts for a long time and is not easily forgotten. “We feel like we have been here for so many years and still the state is not ours. Even our kids, who are growing up here, feel negatively and keep feeling like what is the future prospect here” (BB, personal communication, June 25, 2020).

### ***Feeling of Statelessness***

The participants felt they do not belong to any state because they do not have access to the state welfare facilities. “I had cousins who were brilliant and wanted to utilize the quota seats for medical from the state through merit, but because of discrimination they couldn’t, even though they were meritorious. We have no state welfare for these things” (SA, personal communication, February 11, 2021).

### ***Betrayal***

The participants felt betrayed by the Central Government. They felt that the Government of India had failed to take care of their rights since the merger. “We were weak. The Indian Government was not with us. They betrayed us” (PT, personal communication, April 11, 2020).

### ***Learned Helplessness***

Some of the participants accepted discrimination as part of their lived reality. An element of learned helplessness was noticeable. “In Sikkim, discrimination still exists. But the law itself is discriminatory. If you have made the law in such a manner, what can one do?” (AB, personal communication, May 21, 2020).

### ***Out-Migration***

An increasing number of emerging adults among the old settlers leave Sikkim because they do not want to live in a discriminatory environment.

The younger generation of our community do not come back to Sikkim because of the number of restrictions that are put here. You are a young person, the world today is open for you. Why would you come and live in such a place? Anywhere else if you put the same hard work you will soar. (PT, personal communication, April 11, 2020)

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## Discussion

### ***Perceived Discrimination***

Findings indicated that old settlers attributed perceived discrimination to the racial difference between themselves and the locals. This attribution is based on racial differences between mainlanders and Northeasterners and the issue of Sikkim subject citizenship. For the old settlers, groups exist on two levels—one, based on the citizenry issue where the in-group comprises of the old settlers, and the out-group comprises Sikkim subject holders. Two, based on the issue of race where the in-group is comprised of the mainlanders and the out-group is formed by the Northeasterners. In both cases of group-based identity conceptualization, the old settlers are part of the minority and non-dominant group, creating a double jeopardy situation, which leads to discrimination (Sherif, 1966; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Irrespective of their varying ethnicities, the old settlers consider themselves as one group and find commonality in their identity conceptualization based on their history of settlement in Sikkim and their membership in the business community. The attribution of discrimination in the case of old settlers can therefore be considered a result of their group identity over personal traits, as suggested by the personal/group discrimination discrepancy phenomena (Dion, 2001). An interesting aspect that emerged during the analysis was that five participants were not involved in business-related work and yet considered themselves as a part of the business community. This stereotyping of their identity could buffer the negative effects of perceived discrimination (Dion, 2002).

In the Indian context, non-conforming religious or tribal groups that are settled within states have often been considered as outsiders (Oommen, 1982). The creation of the outsider identity is due to the transition in the policy of the Government of India for state creation. Initially, states were created based on linguistic commonality. However, over time the policy transitioned towards creating states based on religious or tribal status. Thereby shifting the conceptualization of in-groups and out-groups from linguistic commonality to religious or tribal group membership (Oommen, 1982). This categorization ignores the duration of settlement of the minority and their positive impact on the region (Ramiah et al., 2010). As a result, old settlers in Sikkim are considered outsiders, although their families have settled in Sikkim for more than a century. In line with the social identity theory, the passing of resolutions such as article 371F (Legislative department, n.d.) and the finance bill of 2008 (Income Tax Department, 2008), whilst attempting to protect the in-group, led to the formulation of the old settlers as outsiders, even though linguistic commonality was present (Amin, 2012).

The privileging of the in-group can also be seen in the following example. In 1988, the Government of Sikkim claimed to the Indian Parliament via their Member of Parliament, that there were individuals residing in Sikkim who were stateless since they did not have Sikkim subject or Indian citizenship. The state government claimed that these were genuine omissions since these individuals lived in remote areas of Sikkim were not informed about the Sikkim subject regulation and therefore remained without the Sikkim subject (Home Department of the Government of Sikkim, 1989b).

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A request was made to the Government of India to convert these individuals to Sikkim subjects as they were settled in Sikkim for many years. Converting to Sikkim subjects would automatically make them Indian citizens based on Sikkim Citizenship Order, 1975 (Home Department of the Government of Sikkim, 1989a). The conversion, first to Sikkim subjects and then to Indian citizens was astute, as to be a domicile of Sikkim, an individual would need to have a Sikkim subject. The conversion of these stateless citizens to Sikkim subjects first would then also allow them to be domiciles. However, a curious criterion was inserted into the regulation stating that registration as a stateless citizen would not be applicable for individuals living in the notified bazar areas of Sikkim. The bazar areas mostly comprised of the old settlers and due to this clause, they were excluded from registering as stateless citizens and claiming that they too did not know about the Sikkim subject regulation of 1961 (Home Department of the Government of Sikkim, 1989a). This was an important event that showcased the in-group favouritism towards the indigenous community. Seventy-seven thousand people became Sikkim subjects, 14 years after the merger. Understanding the legality of retrospectively granting Sikkim subject without the existence of a monarchy by a democratic nation such as India is beyond the scope of this paper but should be focused on by future studies.

The geopolitical changes in Sikkim would affect the identity conceptualization of the locals, as they had to adjust to the new normal of being citizens rather than subjects (Todd, 2018). This transition could lead to higher levels of threat perception and insecurity (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007). According to the participants, locals perceive that the racial commonality of mainlanders with the politicians of the central government puts them in a more advantageous position and their social links in mainland India help them conduct business, showcasing higher threat perception. The success of the petition to the Rajya Sabha also proved to be counterproductive for the old settlers as the locals perceived the conclusion reached was a result of partiality. This finding is interesting as it brings to light that threat perception based on race-based identity differences remains high in Sikkim after 45 years of merger (Sheriff, 1966).

A reason cited by the participants for perceived discrimination was the jealousy felt by the locals by the economic success of the old settlers. According to the participants, the locals did not have knowledge about conducting business or have networks in mainland India to assist them in the process. Therefore, they discriminated against the old settlers by curtailing other aspects of their lives, such as restricting domicile status, reservations, and other benefits. According to the realistic group conflict theory, dominant groups discriminate against non-dominant groups when there is competition for material resources (Sherif, 1966). Further, in line with the social identity theory, the in-group members attempted to protect their members by providing exclusive control on state government jobs, land ownership, and other welfare programs (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Similar examples of discrimination can be noted in the northeastern state of Assam during the early 1980s, where the locals, threatened by the economic success of Punjabis, Marwaris, and Bengalis formed a movement to remove these “outsiders” from the state (Oommen, 1982; Singh, 2021).

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An interesting theme that emerged was the participants' claim that the locals did not tend to discriminate. They stated that politics of polarization as a means to garner votes was the major reason for discrimination. Studies have shown that polarization between communities and creating the "us vs them" mentality feeds vote-based, anti-minority politics (Liu, 2012; Thatal, 2015). According to Ramiah et al. (2010), voting for anti-immigration parties is a form of expressing passive discrimination by the majority group. Therefore, the claim of the participants that the locals do not discriminate but discrimination is an outcome of politics is valid in so far as active discrimination is concerned (Ramiah et al., 2010). The existence of anti-immigration and discriminatory laws against the old settlers showcases that the locals might be passively discriminating since political parties that discriminate based on group differences win elections and pass the above-mentioned resolutions.

The participants felt that their contribution to improving the state's economy was not acknowledged. The old settlers helped establish modern economic systems of taxation and banking in the kingdom. Chogyal (King) and the British political officers invited them for this purpose (Kharel & Bhutia, 2013). A participant elaborated on the hardships of trade in the kingdom in the early years to make the point that the old settlers suffered similarly to the locals and deserved equal treatment.

The participants claimed that the old settlers were easy targets for discrimination as they were not united. For instance, the petition filed in the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions (2013) was the work of a single individual and not the entire community. Trust issues due to ethnic differences in caste, religion, language, and culture affect their ability to act collectively. Similar to the Northeasterners in Delhi, collective action suffers due to their heterogeneity (Sohi & Singh, 2014). Further, their migration experience, prejudice, minority status, and lack of role models in the socio-political scene negatively affect their ability to take collective action (Sohi & Singh, 2014). Literature on conformity further explains how group cohesion can be affected by even one non-conforming member (Parida & Gupta, 2017).

### ***Reactions***

Anger, disappointment, and fear were the predominant negative feelings associated with the experience of discrimination (Matheson & Anisman, 2009). The participants could not express this anger as they were fearful of the consequences due to their minority status. Previous incidents of standing up against discrimination resulted in violence from the locals, thwarting new efforts. One of the participants shared an incident where an old settler was harassed on social media and threatened with lawsuits after arguing with the police. The incident was perceived from a racial lens rather than a common issue between citizens and police. Locals expressed racial slurs, including calls for expulsion of the old settlers and other mainlanders from the state.

The participants felt betrayed by the Central Government for not taking care of their interests or providing protection to them. The old settlers claim that they chose to continue as Indian citizens, rejecting the offer to become Sikkim subjects, and now they are facing discrimination due to the same reason. They referenced the parity system, where reservations were provided to the tribal community in the state legislature due

to their minority status to provide security and representation to them (Kazi, 2009). They claimed that none of these benefits were given to the old settlers, who were also a minority in the state. This decision still causes disappointment as the state uses the Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) to discriminate. State-sponsored welfare facilities and domicile status are only available to individuals with SSC (Land Revenue & Disaster Management, 2011; Law Department of the Government of Sikkim, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Due to these circumstances, the old settlers feel stateless even though they are voters in Sikkim.

Passive acceptance and learned helplessness result from feelings of uncontrollability to create change (Green, 1982). The development of self-defeating attitudes and passive acceptance are the consequences of long-term discrimination (Uomoto, 1986). A participant claimed that the majority dictates democratic functioning, and in Sikkim, this has resulted in the creation of discriminatory laws. Since old settlers are a minority, they can never get a representation in the state legislature, and hence there is no solution apart from the passive acceptance of the current status.

Out-migration is another coping strategy adopted when an individual feels targeted (Sithou & Punathil, 2017). The younger population of old settlers widely used this strategy. They claimed that they did not want to lead restricted lives in Sikkim. The recent reverse migration of the Northeasterners from major cities in India results from similar circumstances (Sithou & Punathil, 2017).

## Conclusion

A double jeopardy situation exists for the old settlers in Sikkim as they are in the minority and racially different. The phenomenon of out-migration due to discrimination is a cause of significant concern as it highlights a form of subtle ethnic cleansing. Future studies could follow the quantitative method in assessing the levels of distress felt by the old settlers. They could focus on assessing the negative effects of discrimination regarding healthcare, employment, and dropout rates. A limitation of the present study was that females were lesser in number. Further studies are recommended focusing on the experiences of females and other genders from the old settler community as they are often in triple jeopardy situations where discrimination could be worse. This study helps to understand the regional nature of discrimination where policymakers can focus on demography and political strength when creating laws for affirmative action.

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