

More Than a Face: The Mizo Experience of Being Indian in a World of Stereotypes

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Abstract

The experience of being Indian is often mediated through visible markers of identity, including language, culture, and physical appearance. For many people from Northeast India, particularly the Mizo community, these markers frequently become sources of exclusion and misrecognition both within India and abroad. This paper, “*More Than a Face: The Mizo Experience of Being Indian in a World of Stereotypes*,” examines the complex intersections of ethnicity, nationality, race, and identity that shape the lived experiences of Mizos. It explores how stereotypical assumptions based on East Asian physical features often lead to questioning of their Indian identity, resulting in experiences of othering, racial discrimination, and social marginalization. Drawing upon personal narratives, historical context, and existing scholarship on identity and belonging, the study investigates how Mizos negotiate their place within the broader Indian nation-state while simultaneously confronting external perceptions that associate Indianness with narrowly defined racial and cultural characteristics. The paper argues that the persistent questioning of Mizo identity reveals deeper issues concerning the construction of national identity and the invisibility of India’s ethnic diversity in mainstream discourse. At the same time, the study highlights the resilience of the Mizo people in asserting a multifaceted identity that embraces both their distinct ethnic heritage and their citizenship within a pluralistic India. By foregrounding voices and experiences that are often overlooked, the paper challenges dominant narratives of nationality based on appearance and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of Indian identity. Ultimately, it contends that being Indian cannot be reduced to physical features or racial stereotypes; rather, it is a dynamic and diverse experience shaped by history, culture, and shared belonging. The paper contributes to broader discussions on race, identity, citizenship, and multiculturalism in contemporary societies.

Keywords: identity, stereotypes, Mizo, ethnic, experience, tourist

Introduction

In 2019, I had the privilege of travelling to Bali, Indonesia, with my husband to celebrate our 10th wedding anniversary. Bali is a popular tourist destination, and with a large proportion of its population consisting of visitors from around the world, one of the most common

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Published: 12 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301141>

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questions people ask when meeting someone is, “Where are you from?”

It is pertinent to mention that I am from the North-East of India. Whenever my husband and I were asked where we were from, we would proudly reply, “India.” More often than not, our answer was met with surprise and disbelief. Some people looked as though they thought we were joking or even lying. Others would ask why we said we were from India. The most common responses were that they thought we were from the Philippines, Thailand, or China.

We stayed in Bali for five days. After repeatedly encountering surprised reactions to our answer, my husband became increasingly annoyed. Eventually, whenever someone asked where we were from, he would simply reply, “Mongolia.” Strangely enough, that seemed to satisfy everyone. There were no more puzzled looks, no more follow-up questions, and no more disbelief.

When we returned to India, we had another unexpected experience. At immigration, non-Indian passport holders were required to fill out a form. An official was distributing these forms based solely on the appearance of arriving passengers. He handed one to us as well. After all, how was he supposed to know we were Indian passport holders merely by looking at our faces?

After spending days explaining to strangers that we were indeed Indian, it was painful to find that even in our own country, someone had made the same assumption based on our appearance. It was a small incident, perhaps, but it was hurtful nonetheless.

That experience left me reflecting on a question that continues to resonate with me:

Where am I originally from?

What is my identity?

Appearance and the Construction of National Identity

The experience I describe touches on a question that many people from India's North-East have confronted: the difference between citizenship, ethnicity, appearance, and identity.

When people in Bali doubted that we were Indian, they were not really responding to our nationality. They were responding to their own mental image of what an "Indian" is supposed to look like. For many outside India, the immense ethnic diversity of India is not well known. As a result, they often assume that someone with East Asian or Southeast Asian features must be from China, Thailand, the Philippines, Mongolia, or elsewhere.

What is striking in my story is that the same thing happened upon my return to India. The immigration official's mistake reflected a similar assumption—that an Indian passport holder should look a certain way. This is a reminder that misconceptions about identity are not confined to foreigners.

So, where am I originally from?

The answer depends on the aspect of identity being considered:

- **Nationality:** I am Indian.

- **Region:** I am from the North-East of India.
- **Community/Ethnicity:** I belong to the particular ethnic, tribal, or cultural community into which I was born.
- **Citizenship and legal identity:** I am a citizen of India with all the rights and obligations that entails.
- **Personal identity:** I am also shaped by my experiences, values, profession, family, language, and beliefs.

Identity is therefore not a single thing. It is layered.

The deeper question raised by my experience is perhaps not "Where am I originally from?" but rather "Why do others feel entitled to define where I belong based solely on my appearance?"

The irony of my experience is powerful. For five days, strangers questioned whether I am Indian. Then, when I arrived in India, an official effectively did the same thing. That moment reveals how fragile and appearance-based many assumptions about identity can be.

Yet none of those assumptions change the reality of who I am. My identity is not determined by the expectations of tourists in Bali or by the quick judgment of an immigration officer. Their reactions tell us more about their understanding of India than about my place within it.

In a country as diverse as India, there is no single Indian face. The existence of people from Northeast India challenges narrow ideas of nationality and reminds us that identity is often richer and more complex than the categories others try to place us in.

Perhaps the most accurate answer to my question is - I am from the place where my history, citizenship, culture, and sense of belonging meet. Others may misidentify me, but they do not get to define me.

Social Perceptions

In an increasingly globalized world, travel often brings people from different cultures and backgrounds together. Yet, for many people from Mizoram, travelling abroad sometimes leads to an unexpected and recurring question: "Are you really from India?" The question usually arises because of their facial features, which resemble those commonly associated with East or Southeast Asia. While the question may be asked out of curiosity rather than malice, it reveals a deeper misunderstanding about the diversity of India and the identity of its people.

India is widely celebrated for its cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. However, the global image of India often reflects only a narrow representation of this diversity. Popular media, tourism campaigns, and international portrayals of India tend to focus on certain regions and communities, unintentionally reinforcing a stereotype about what an Indian person should look like. As a result, individuals from Northeast India, including Mizos, Nagas, and others, are frequently mistaken for foreigners, even though they are citizens of India with their own distinct histories and cultures.

The people of Mizoram have unique cultural traditions, languages, and social structures that contribute to the rich mosaic of Indian society. Their physical features reflect historical migration patterns and ethnic connections with other Asian communities. However, these features do not diminish their identity as Indians. On the contrary, they illustrate the remarkable diversity that defines India as a nation.

This misunderstanding highlights a broader issue of identity and recognition. National identity is often simplified through stereotypes, particularly in international contexts where knowledge about a country may be limited. When a single image becomes the dominant representation of a nation, communities that fall outside that image risk being overlooked or misunderstood.

The confusion surrounding the identity of Mizos also raises important constitutional principles. The Constitution of India guarantees equality and dignity to all citizens. Under Article 14 of the Constitution of India, every citizen is entitled to equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Similarly, Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. These provisions affirm that Indian identity is not defined by physical appearance but by citizenship and shared constitutional values.

Despite these guarantees, social perceptions and stereotypes can still influence how individuals are viewed both within and outside the country. For people from the northeastern states, repeated questioning about their nationality can sometimes create a feeling of alienation. Being asked to explain one's identity repeatedly may lead to a sense that one's belonging is being indirectly questioned.

At the same time, such moments can also become opportunities for education and cultural exchange. When people learn about the diverse ethnic communities of India, they often gain a deeper appreciation for the country's complexity and richness. Conversations that begin with confusion can end with greater understanding and respect.

Addressing this issue requires greater visibility and representation of Northeast communities in national and global platforms. Media, education systems, and cultural initiatives can play an important role in showcasing the diversity of India. Films, literature, academic research, and tourism campaigns that highlight the culture and heritage of the northeastern states can help reshape global perceptions.

Ultimately, the identity of a nation as vast as India cannot be confined to a single stereotype. India is a country of many cultures, languages, and ethnic groups, each contributing to the collective identity of the nation. The people of Mizoram and other northeastern states are an integral part of this national story.

Recognizing and celebrating this diversity is essential not only for correcting misconceptions abroad but also for strengthening unity within the country. When the world understands that India has many faces, it begins to see the true essence of the nation: a unity that exists not despite diversity, but because of it.

The people of Mizoram have a distinct cultural identity shaped by their language, traditions, and social structures. Their culture reflects centuries of history, adaptation, and community life in the hills of northeastern India. Like every other region of the country, Mizoram contributes its own unique thread to the larger fabric of Indian society.

Despite this reality, the experience of being misidentified can sometimes be uncomfortable. When individuals are repeatedly asked to explain their nationality or origin, it can create a subtle sense of exclusion. Identity is deeply tied to belonging, and when that identity is questioned based on physical appearance, it can lead to feelings of being misunderstood or invisible.

This experience is not limited to international travel. At times, similar misunderstandings occur within India itself. Many people from the northeastern states have shared stories of being mistaken for foreigners or addressed in languages such as Chinese or Nepali simply because of their appearance. Such incidents highlight the gap between the constitutional ideals of equality and the social perceptions that still exist in society.

However, legal principles alone cannot fully change social attitudes. Awareness, education, and representation play equally important roles. One reason the confusion about the identity of Mizos persists is the limited visibility of Northeast India in national and global platforms. Films, television, and international media rarely portray the everyday lives and cultures of these communities. As a result, many people outside the region remain unfamiliar with the diversity that exists within India.

Increasing representation can help address this gap. When the cultures and stories of Northeast India appear more frequently in literature, cinema, academic research, and tourism promotion, people across the world will gain a broader understanding of India's diversity. Such representation not only corrects misconceptions but also fosters respect and appreciation for different cultures.

Education also plays a crucial role. School curricula and public discussions can emphasize the multicultural nature of India, ensuring that future generations grow up with a deeper understanding of the country's diversity. When people learn that India includes communities with a wide range of physical features, languages, and traditions, stereotypes begin to fade.

At the same time, individuals from Mizoram and other northeastern states often turn moments of confusion into opportunities for dialogue. When someone expresses surprise at their nationality, it becomes a chance to explain the rich diversity of India and introduce others to cultures that they may not have encountered before. In this way, simple conversations can become small but meaningful acts of cultural exchange.

Conclusions:

Ultimately, national identity cannot be defined by a single physical appearance. A country as vast as India is bound together not by uniformity but by diversity. The strength of India lies in its ability to embrace different cultures, languages, and ethnic backgrounds within a shared constitutional framework.

The people of Mizoram are as Indian as anyone from any other part of the country. Their traditions, stories, and contributions are an essential part of India's collective identity. Recognizing this reality helps move society closer to the ideals of equality, dignity, and unity that the Constitution envisions.

In a world that often relies on quick visual assumptions, it is important to remember that identity is more than appearance. India has many faces, and each of them tells a story. Understanding this truth not only corrects misconceptions but also celebrates the richness of a nation whose greatest strength lies in its diversity.

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