Breaking barriers

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Cheating charges cut both ways

llegations of cheating against a few Africans might have unfairly cast a shadow over the entire community. But many African students who come to India for studies are cheated as well, and in big numbers. Here are a few cases that are key to understanding how widespread is the problem:

"After completing one year of my course at a nursing college here and when I was about to sit for exams, my college authorities tell me that I am not eligible for pursuing General Nursing and Midwifery (GNM) course here," says Lawal Racheal Oluwatimilehin, a student from Nigeria

The principal of the same college had told him during admission that he was eligible for the course. "He had collected \$3,500 as tuition fee before taking my original



school certificates to give me a seat. One year of my stay here in Bengaluru had gone waste as I had to again start from scratch. rued Lawal, who came to Bengaluru in 2014 and is overstaying here since November last

Lawal eventually managed to get admission in a different college. But once again she felt cheated on learning that the institution was not recognised according to the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO). She is now desperately trying to extend her visa for completing her education here after finally

finding a genuine college.

But Lawal is not the only victim. Eight of 10 Africans who come to Bengaluru for education end up getting cheated by one college or the other, says Emmanuel, a student leader. "There are a lucky few who get admission to reputed colleges, but a majority of them are lured by colleges that are non-recognised and whose bonafides are unacceptable for FRRO.

Emmanuel elaborates: "When an African back home expresses interest in studying in Bengaluru, agents there show websites of several colleges in east, north and northeast Bengaluru, showing off their infrastructure, reputation, recognition and other facilities. But when the student lands here, they discover these colleges either function from a couple of floors at some commercial complex or 3-4 bedroom houses."

Some colleges even claim that they have hostel facilities for students. But in reality, these are rooms rented out by house-owners living nearby, he adds.

A reputable nursing college in Kumaraswamy Layout harassed a Nigerian student by forcing her to study in the college. This, despite she writing to them that her sponsor for her education had died. She had sought a No Objection Certificate (NOC) to get back to her country as she would be unable to pursue with her studies. But the college was adamant that she continue her course and is refusing to give her her original certificates and

She had already paid \$4,000 as fee for a year, and now the college is forcing her to pay the entire course fee to relieve her.

Bellie Thomas



African students, bridging divides

Cultural stereotypes and deeds of a few bad elements have unfairly sullied the image of the community of African students in the city. But poor, hard-working students who constitute the vast majority have own stories of cheating and exploitation.

rapped in the cross-fire of cultural divisions, are African students in Bengaluru getting stereotyped? Are local communities who complain about the misdeeds of a few students unfairly branded as racist? Or is there a genuine chance for consensus, reconciliation and better understanding?

The police, community leaders and the general public are unanimous that these tricky issues cannot be resolved in a hurry. Cordial relationships as a process is slow, yet achievable, as attempts by a few concerned officials in the law and order machinery indicate.

Having spearheaded that intervention in the recent past,



the city's former Additional Commissioner of Police (East), P Harishekharan should know

The issue, he says, should be approached from three perspectives, the African students, the local community and the police department. "Eighty per

cent of these students are settling in the East and South East parts of the city, in areas on the outer side of the Outer Ring Road between Hebbal junction and KR Puram," he points out.

Socio-cultural pressure Educational institutions cater-

ing to them have sprung up in big numbers in the area. So have flats and independent houses servicing their living needs. "Consequently, a socio, cultural and economic pressure has been building up in these localities between the students and the locals.

of over-staying visa conditions, drugs and immoral trafficking and traffic violations. But should the deeds of a minority of these students be allowed to show the entire community in a poor light? Shouldn't the system be more empathetic to the genuine concerns of the African students

> Faced with allegations that they were being harassed by 'uncaring' policemen who would refuse to even register First Information Reports (FIRs), Harishekharan had devised a mechanism to address their issues. "I interacted peacefully with them and learnt that it was a problem of communication," he recalls.

about the way they are treated,

even cheated here?

Differences in dressing, be-

haviour and lifestyles have only

compounded the cultural con-

flicts and amplified the stereo-

types. For the police, the prob-

lems are related more to cases

Lower level staff at the police stations would simply not understand their English accent. "Our policemen would ask them to just wait. They would wait for hours and go away without their grievances being heard or addressed."

Coordination committee

The solution was the creation of a unique forum, the Police-African Students Coordination Committee with a clear mandate to address the pending problems. Student leaders from each of the African nations were made members. Over 1,000 students were called and their problems heard at length. Representatives from the police, Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) and the education departments were also called for the meetings.

Constituted in January 2016, this panel has already addressed several key issues linked to African students in Bengaluru. Yet, problems persist. The issue of over-staying has not been fully addressed, and as cases of cheating that surface now and then indicate, is not fully understood as well.

Here's a glimpse of the cheating cases the African students have had to endure: Anyanwu Dorathy, a 42-yearold Nigerian woman had landed in Bengaluru in November 2014 to study animation. After eight months into the course, she learnt that the college was not affiliated to any university.

Ordeals of cheating

Although Dorathy got her money back, her ordeal continued when she joined another Rasheed Kappan

animation college in Jayanagar. This institution had claimed that it had the necessary affiliations. But Dorathy was shocked to learn that the FRRO did not accept the bonafide given by her new college. She had already wasted two years and is finding it difficult to extend her education

Is there a way out of this per-



TANVI HUSSAIN Student

If they have a bad experience with locals, international students become wary and they stay in their own groups, not mingling much. People should understand that African students are just like us and they are fun to be

sistent problem? Yes, but as senior police officials say, it is not a problem for the police alone. The education department should launch a special cell to educate African students about the rules here. "The department should prepare a manual to be sent to all colleges listing these. Ideally, one or two classes should be conducted to introduce India and Karnataka to these students to build relationships," says Harishekha-

There may be a few black sheep who indulge in drug-trafficking and immoral activities. But over 90% of the students, according to the police, are genuine, hard-working stu-

The interests of these students would be served well if a proper system is in place to weed out the bad elements. But paucity of reliable data on overstaying students and those indulging in crime have been a challenge. The time is just ripe to address these concerns and foster better understanding of Bengaluru's Africans.



JOHN JERRY Student from Mali

Authorities here say that we are overstaying but they are not trying to understand the cause. Agents bring us to fraud colleges. By the time we realise this, we lose a



EMMANUEL Student leader

Majority of us come here to study but we are cheated by agents and colleges. They only care about making money out of us. Why is there no system in place to ensure this does not happen?



MUSAB HASSAN Entrepreneur

We might not be able to control how their experience with locals is, unless the government creates a platform for interaction. But we can make sure that at least their college offers a supporting environment

Cheated by agents, distanced by locals

from Africa come here in the hope of having an international experience, learning about a new country, its culture and people. Unfortunately, most of them end up being cheated by agents and even the local experience is unlike what they expect.

"The agent said India would be a good place to study, so I came here, even though I didn't know anyone. They told us that we would get part-time jobs here, like students do in the US

wished to remain anonymous, said.

She says she does not feel safe in the city. "People pass comments at us. They don't see us as human beings, they treat us like animals," she said. She said that African students are charged more for everything, from bus tickets to apartment

Though her experience with locals has not been good, classmates are more accepting, she said. "I had lots of friends in my first college who were from dif-

esides seeking good ed- but there are no jobs for us," a ferent parts of India. But in my ucation, young students student from Nigeria, who new college, my classmates usually speak Hindi because they don't know English very well. So I have not been able to make friends.

> She is not the only one who feels this way. Another student from Togo, echoed her experience. He has also been cheated by an agent who promised a college of global standards when actually it was not even accredited. "I left that college after a semester and have

want to go back empty-handed, without a degree," he said.

He said that, as an African student, finding accommodation is difficult and often, they have to deal with bullying owners. He pointed out, "There are lots of Indians living in Africa. We are welcoming and we respect them. Even the laws in my country to protect foreigners are strong. We expected the same kind of treatment when we came here, but we are disappointed," he said.

Locals view them suspicious-

joined a better college. Life ly and make them feel alien, here has been hard but I don't students say. "People here are racist. They don't even want to sit with us in an autorickshaw because they don't want to touch us," said 20-year-old

John Jerry, from Mali. He does not feel safe in the city because he fears he will be attacked, even if he does not do anything wrong. "There are colleges in my country too, but I came here because I wanted the experience of being in a different country. I am disappointed. If anyone I know back home

"There are lots of Indians living in Africa. We are welcoming and we respect them. Even the laws in my country to protect foreigners are strong. We expected the same kind of treatment when we came here,

but we are

is planning to come here, I tell local students. Colleges should them to be careful," he said.

Musab Hassan, a young entrepreneur, said that colleges with international students should take extra measures to create an atmosphere that encourages cultural exchange. Cultural awareness can foster friendships.

"Often international students tend to be in a close-knit group with others from their less room for interaction with

encourage interaction by assigning a student guide or conducting team-building activities," he suggested.

In his college, Musab had classmates from different parts of the world. He recalled that it was a rewarding experience. 'We shouldn't say no to having students from other countries because there is a lot we can learn from them, we can gain own country and that leaves perspective and understand other cultures," he said.

Meghana Choukkar

