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A Novel Virus, A New Racial Slur

By: Naorem Pushparani Chanu, Gorky Chakraborty

In the wake of Covid-19, racial discrimination towards people from the North East has acquired a new edge. The lack of cultural understanding in mainland Indian communities has always manifested itself in slurs and attacks that have increased and not reduced.

The North East has historically been associated with in-migration from mainland India and beyond. Since 1991, this has changed, and the difference between in- and out-migration has narrowed significantly.¹ In absolute terms, the Census indicates that between 1991 and 2011 approximately 2.3 million people have migrated from the North East to different locations in mainland India. West Bengal, Maharashtra, Delhi, and Karnataka have been the main locations, largely due to the presence of metropolises.

Work is the principal reason for out-migration. The migrants, particularly the youth, are employed in service sectors like BPOs, restaurants, shopping malls, nursing, or spas. Bengt Karlsson and Dolly Kikon (2017) suggest they are recruited for their ‘exotic Asian’ appearance. Their ‘oriental’ looks, proficiency in English, and good dressing sense enable them to secure jobs, according to Tiplut Nobjri and A S Shimreiwung (2017). Ironically these also become the reasons for their indictment of being ‘un-Indian’ by the locals.

Chinky-momo-corona!

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore a novel racial epithet for those with Mongoloid phenotypes in India, affecting the migrants from the North East. Many of them who were already used to the racial slurs ‘chinki’, ‘momo’, or ‘Chinese’; now became ‘corona’. Incidents of stigmatizing hapless citizens appeared in the press and social media.

“Before Corona, North East women were seen as ‘walking prostitute chinkies’ and now we are ‘walking deadly virus’. Either way, we need to be purged or eliminated from their society.”

This could take the shape of physical intimidation in excluding the perceived ‘carriers’. A female Mizo student in Delhi spoke to us over the phone and shared her experience during the initial days of the pandemic:

It was before the lockdown during March when I went to my university to submit my assignment. Three men in a bike constantly followed me shouting “corona, corona” and they were teasing and laughing at me. They were scary and I preferred not to respond although [I] felt like making a video. But they could have easily snatched my phone. I had to constantly avoid them by walking fast, taking a different lane.

The student further reflected how calling names has been part of the daily lived experience of North Easterners in Delhi:

You may find [it] strange but it’s nothing different when they call me ‘corona’. [I] feel, they are just using a different slur instead of ‘chinki’. Actually, we were never respected by them [mainstream Indians]. They are now associating us with some ‘germ’ or ‘virus’ which only shows how they really feel about us. Before Corona North East women were seen as ‘walking prostitute chinkies’ and now we are ‘walking deadly virus’. Either way, we need to be purged or eliminated from their society.

Venturing out is full of dangers, in an environment of the reactivated *us* and *them*. A male student from Manipur residing in Gujarat, narrated his experience over the phone:

I went out of my apartment to a nearby vegetable vendor. There in the way, some guys called me ‘corona’, and said why don’t I just go back to China? I ignored because these are dangerous times [...] I feel scared even when I am staying inside my apartment. For the first time, I have become desperate to go back home. This place no more seems to be safe..

This sense of desperation to return home was common. Another student from Nagaland residing in Delhi expressed similar fears when we called her:

I have stopped going out of my flat even for essentials. News about increasing racial attacks against North Eastern people in various parts of the country not only makes me scared but my parents too at home. They remain worried about my wellbeing and have asked me not to go out at all. I do online shopping now which I find comparatively expensive, but it's okay since spending a little more money is better than becoming a victim of a racial attack. People have become crazy here. I would go back once the special trains are finalised [...] I want to reach home.

“Why do we need to tell people that we are ‘Indian’? Why do we need to prove our identity when a Bengali, Panjabi or Malayali doesn't?”

A male from Manipur, employed in a private firm in Delhi, voiced his frustration over the phone regarding his identity in times of the pandemic:

The outbreak of Coronavirus brings out the hostile attitude of the locals against the North Eastern people in the city. This feeling was already there [...] Coronavirus brought out the worst out of them [mainstream Indian society]. We have been called ‘chinkies’, ‘Nepalis’, or ‘Chinese’ before ,but now we are ‘corona’. They never consider us Indians. Why do we need to tell people that we are ‘Indian’? Why do we need to prove our identity when a Bengali, Panjabi or Malayali doesn't? They also look different like us. Don't they realise that Indians comprise different phenotypes [...] ascribing one face to all Indians may itself lead to racism.

Such racism has been all too common. The shuttler, Jwala Gutta was [savagely trolled](#) as ‘half Corona’ because her mother is from China. On the pretext of keeping the virus at bay, a 21-year-old Ladakhi student was [shouted down](#) by a man in a local market in Jammu, “*chal hatt, aap logon ki wajah se coronavirus aaya hai*” (Get lost; it is because of you people the Coronavirus has come [to India]).

It seems that ‘otherisation’ is not enough, they should also be taught a lesson or two.

Such thought processes also infect health care providers. A 24-year-old woman from Sikkim, living in Kolkata, [narrated](#) how she was asked by hospitals to undergo screening for Covid-19 before being examined. Neither did she exhibit symptoms of viral infection nor did she have any travel history, but she was nonetheless sent to an isolation ward. The next morning when the doctor came to check on her, the first question was: “Are you from China?”

It seems that ‘otherisation’ is not enough, they should also be taught a lesson or two. In Delhi, a middle-aged man spat on a Manipuri girl and called her ‘Corona’, which became the first highlighted case of racial discrimination during the on-going pandemic. Students in Kolkata were allegedly [beaten by their neighbours](#) who forced them to vacate their premises. As the students were leaving, the crowds chanted “Go corona go!”

[Police] officials instead of acting as enforcers of the law, become the ‘carriers’ of racial evils that afflict society and in the process create an ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Similar incidents have been reported from Bengaluru, where female North Eastern out-migrants were not only [threatened by male neighbours](#) at midnight and asked to move out of their premises but the act was video graphed to exhibit how ‘patriotic’ they have been in their act of kicking out the ‘virus’. The local police, however, did not stop this. In a similar instance, in May, a 20-year-old girl in Gurugram was [brutally attacked](#) by local residents, after she was called ‘corona’ and was told the police would be called, whom the locals said “are on our side.” After she fell unconscious the police intervened but instead of filing a complaint against the perpetrators, they asked her to “compromise.”

These incidents pinpoint how the police officials instead of acting as enforcers of the law, become the ‘carriers’ of racial evils that afflict society and in the process create an ‘us’ and ‘them’ division. Hasn't institutional racism, thereby, become a part of the system?

When a 20-year-old student hailing from Nagaland went to buy groceries in Mysuru with friends, [they were prevented](#) from entering the store on the presumptive understanding that they were not ‘Indian’ but ‘Chinese’. They produced their Aadhaar cards as proof of their Indian nationality, but were still refused service. In another [bizarre incident](#), six young women from Nagaland working in a BPO in Ahmedabad were ‘mistaken’ as Chinese and taken to a hospital and not released even after testing negative for the Coronavirus. This incident occurred after a complaint that these women were infected with the virus. One of the victims exclaimed about “how looking different may lead one to be treated differently.”

Being a woman in a patriarchal social order has several underpinnings. More so, if she bears a Mongoloid phenotype: the vulnerabilities of victimization in public become glaring. The [return to the North East](#) of a large number of nurses after quitting their jobs from several care providing institutions in Kolkata provides us with such an impression. For these hapless nurses, stigmatization and victimization lay at the intersection of race, gender, and profession that made them vulnerable to any eventuality.

On racial discrimination

The large scale exodus of North Eastern migrants in 2012 from different cities stands as a watershed which is worth reflecting on. Rumours of attacks on them in retaliation to the killings of Muslims in Assam generated a fear psychosis. To ‘escape’ the fear, migration back to the North East appeared to be the only option. The [stabbing](#) of a 22-year-old Tibetan student, Tenzin Dhargiyial in Mysore, who ‘looked’ like someone from the North East further added fuel to the exodus. It is noteworthy that the perceived fear of the migrants lay in their different phenotypes and, secondly, the murder of the Tibetan student also lay in his phenotype irrespective of the fact that he had no link with the North East. Prejudices and stereotypes rooted in the ideology of racism led to the exodus of panic stricken north-easterners from urban centres.

Despite recommendations [...] to bring in changes to the provisions of Indian Penal Code to sternly deal with racial attacks, not much progress has been made.

The underlying phenomenon of racial discrimination and stigmatization has been around for a while and has manifested itself on many occasions in violent forms. The killing of 19-year-old [Loitam Richard](#) from Manipur in Bengaluru in 2012; the mysterious murder of 21-year-old [Reingamphy Awungshi](#) from Manipur in Delhi in 2013; and the brutal killing of 20-year-old [Nido Taniam](#) from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi in 2014 are a few incidents pointing in such a direction. It was only after large-scale protests both within the North East and outside that the Indian home ministry was forced to constitute the Bezbaruah committee to look into the matter of discrimination and violence against North Eastern people. Despite recommendations of this committee to bring in changes to the provisions of Indian Penal Code to deal with racial attacks, not much progress has been made.

Why the ‘other’

Epidemics, otherwise biological processes, can carry cultural overtones which often generate racial prejudices by constructing the perceived carrier individuals and communities as the ‘other’ who are to be excluded from ‘sanitised’ spaces. For various reasons, othering become a potent tool during pandemics in calibrating relations amongst individuals and communities within a society.

Lack of cultural understanding among a major section of the Indian mainland’s mainstream societies makes them interpret any difference [...] through a racial lens. This ultimately manifests itself in racial slurs.

Firstly, it provides an *alibi* in identifying scapegoats. David Arnold (1986) writing on cholera epidemics in colonial India, noted that the scapegoat was often “a low caste or a tribal woman, or a prostitute, who was driven out of the village to symbolise the expulsion of the disease from its boundaries.” Secondly, it provides a semblance of (false) knowledge of understanding the novel virus by analysing the ‘other’ as the perceived carrier.

Thirdly, it enables communities to shift the blame on the ‘other’ and their ‘unnatural’ way of life by associating them with the disease; while the sanitised ‘rest’, who do not adhere to ‘unnatural’ ways, potentially remain at a lower risk. Fourthly, novel virus and accompanying epidemics come as a shock as we attempt to adjust to the changed ‘normal’ and adjustment strains the fault lines of the pre-epidemic social order. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) reminds us “in space what came earlier continues to underpin what follows”, racism, communalism and other forms of ‘otherization’ gets reactivated until a known aetiology emerges.

It began in India by stigmatizing those bearing Mongoloid phenotypes, along with their food, lifestyles and manners. The absence of the Mongoloid phenotypes in Indian imaginaries even necessitates a mainland Indian face to play the lead role in a biopic on the Manipuri boxer Mary Kom because North Eastern people ‘don’t look Indian enough’.

Lack of cultural understanding among a major section of the Indian mainland’s mainstream societies makes them interpret any difference — phenotypes, attire, hairstyle, food habits and lifestyles of the migrants — through a racial lens. This ultimately manifests itself in racial slurs.

As migrants from the North East reach new destinations in mainland India , they are exposed to newer social spaces. Adjustment and adaptation becomes buzz words for co-existence, a complex process dependent on both the migrants and locals in the host societies. Since the migrants are culturally and racially distinct, they are more exposed to social challenges in terms of language, food habits, attire and life styles vis-à-vis others in the host societies. These differences along with their Mongoloid phenotypes attract unwanted gaze, often leading to prejudices, stereotypes, and presumptions about their personalities. These create *unseen* borders, which are more *felt* than visualised, often embedded in racial undertones.

Footnotes:

1 The 1991 Census showed that out of the total migration, out-migrants accounted for 39%, rising to 52% in 2001 before declining to 45% in 2011. Individual states have shown fluctuating patterns, except Manipur, which consistently had a higher out-migration during this period.

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