

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND NORTHEAST INDIAN WOMEN: THE PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

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The case of women from Northeast India stands out as emblematic of the challenging state of minority affairs throughout the country. Substantiated examples of racial discrimination have been reported since spring 2020 spatially across the four corners of the sub-continent. The outbreak of Covid-19 has been highly racialized and stigmatized throughout the world with the blame falling on China as the origin of the virus. The profiling of East Asians as suspect carriers of the virus with the resultant taunts and discriminations that then follow has occurred worldwide. In India, the pandemic has reinforced racism against Northeast Indians, a social problem which the country has been grappling with for more than a decade.

Introduction

Throughout the pandemic, the struggle faced by the Northeast Indian community has been as much from discrimination than from the impact of the virus itself. It is a fight not only against the accusations of being “non-Indian”, or worse “unwanted Indians”, but also to achieve due recognition and acceptance as equal Indians.

While the first section of this paper encapsulates the issues faced by this segment of Indian society, the second section outlines incidents of racism against Northeast Indians while tracing xenophobia, othering, and anti-Asian attitudes, during the pandemic. The next section of the paper briefly looks into the migration of Northeast Indian women

into mainland cities, focusing on the push and pull factors. The penultimate section tries to address the structural issue of racism and the absence of stringent anti-racism laws which may have resulted in the pervasiveness of overt acts of racism during the pandemic. The conclusion arrives at the hypothesis of whether there exists a set of legal measures to address this social problem and envisages a possibility of such measures bringing about a change in the societal milieu.

Incidents of Racism

On March 23, 2020, an incident of racial discrimination against a group of women from Northeast India living in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, was reported. A video clip of the incident, which went

viral in social media, showed the women crying as their housing society attempted to forcefully evict them, blaming them for “bringing coronavirus in India”.¹ A similar incident in Mumbai surfaced on April 06, when a Manipuri girl was deliberately attacked by a biker in Mumbai as he drove past.² Such instances of discrimination are symbolic of overt acts of racial prejudice that primarily stems from the non-recognition or misrecognition of Northeast Indians. Indian citizens with an East-Asian complexion living in other parts of the country, especially in the metropolises of India, frequently face these acts of racism.

While racial discrimination against the said demography is not new, in the aftermath of Covid-19 outbreak, there has been an unprecedented upsurge of such acts of discrimination throughout the length and breadth of the country.

They are often faced with slanderous or derogatory terms which invariably pertain to their physical appearance.

The first case of coronavirus in India was reported on January 30, in Kerala.³ The number rose to three cases in the next week,⁴ wherein all the cases were with students who had returned from Wuhan in China, the epicenter of the viral outbreak. However, despite the evidence pointing to the first carriers as being students from Kerala, it was the Northeast Indians who were racially profiled and associated with the virus and subsequently negatively affiliated with the consequences of the disease.

For a Northeast Indian, hearing the question, “Are you from China?” from other Indians is a common phenomenon in public places. Moreover, they are often faced with slanderous or derogatory terms which invariably pertain to their physical appearance.⁵ Frequently such comments are made not out of ignorance but to “other” and question

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their belongingness. This intention of “rejection” is deeply problematic.

Racism and its Genesis in India

Racism, in simple terms, is defined as “discriminatory behavior based on inherited physical appearance.”⁶ Conceptualizing an “Indian face” which is a highly diversified and an inclusive concept, Wouters and Subba argue that East Asian phenotypes “... have not found a place in common imaginaries of the ‘Indian Face’”. Instead, Northeasterners are non-recognized and misrecognized, mirrored back by the wider Indian society as foreigners, hailing from such places as China, Nepal, Thailand, or Japan and on a visit to India, or as ‘lesser Indians’ rather than as equal citizens; and this withholding of equal recognition of ‘Indian-ness’ works to discriminate against and marginalize them.”⁷

The reception of Northeast Indians in different cities may differ depending on the size of the population and the length of their stay. In places such as Delhi or Bangalore, with huge migration flows from the Northeast in the last two decades, incidents of racism were not due to non-recognition but rather a consideration of them being considered as; “lesser Indians” or worse; “unwanted Indians”.⁸ In places where there is less of a concentration of this demography, most cases of discrimination can be related to misrecognition as a “non-Indian” or foreigner. A recent study has shown that due to

such discrimination, “migrants have formed ethnic clusters, which have turned out to be a survival strategy in a new social milieu.” This is true for some Northeast Indians in Delhi.⁹

Profiling Racism in Northeast Indian Women

Racism during the pandemic has amplified racialized outcomes based on cultural patterns and social institutions which are not necessarily “either intentional or individualist”.¹⁰ Considering that racism in India is not only “othering” with negative discriminatory practices, it is structural and has to be understood in those terms. Akoijam validates the above to stress that racism has deeper ideological and structural elements such as superiority-inferiority, subordination, super ordination, etc. Deploying and treating a group of people as inferior beings based on some essentialized “social category” and denying them rights or access to employment and basic amenities of a dignified life etc., are markers of racism.¹¹ It is crucial at this juncture to locate the narratives of women in relation to their isolated experiences and manifested hardships during the pandemic period to support the hypothesis of this essay.

In addition to being “othered”, objectification and despise is commonplace. The women from the region are doubly profiled, being seen as “women with questionable morals” (being slanderously referred to as “easy women”).¹² Racial taunts and abuse during the pandemic have not been confined to the common people on the street; it also percolated to renowned national sportspersons. Writing an opinion in the Indian Express on April 07, with the headline, “Growing up in India with a Chinese mother hasn’t been easy, Covid makes it worse”, Indian ace badminton player, Jwala Gutta, expressed her experience as a child with mixed heritage, often being called “China ka maal” or “made in China”, “half Chinese” or “Chinki”. She wrote how she was given a new label “half corona” and highlighted “the importance of respecting others and of humanity” as India battles the virus.¹³

In another example, women’s national footballer and

national awards winner, Oinam Bembem Devi who comes from Manipur also faced similar discrimination. The official twitter handle of the Indian Women’s Football Team tweeted on April 11, 2020: “We’re taking a break from #WindingTheClockdown to address an important issue. In the last few weeks, we’ve seen several attacks on North-Eastern Indians. There is never an excuse for racism. Let’s stand united and #DistanceTheHate. #HerGameToo.”¹⁴ Asserting that Bembem was not of Chinese origin, the poster of the tweet also highlighted how Indians from the northeastern region have been fighting a battle on two fronts – the Covid-19 outbreak and a spate of racially charged attacks across the country.

These instances of racism are not isolated instances. It has led to systemic racism and institutionalized validation of such practices which is firmly rooted in a larger structure, a structure which makes abuse a daily affair for Northeastern women and treats patterns of structural violence as isolated incidents.

Growing up in India with a Chinese mother hasn’t been easy, Covid makes it worse.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Northeast Indians in cities throughout India have been racially profiled and negatively stereotyped as the “face of coronavirus.”¹⁵ Such profiling led to a spate of racial abuse and discrimination.¹⁶ Such incidents show that the victims desperately assert their “Indian-ness” in the face of such racial abuse and discrimination.¹⁷ Yet, another mode of visible hardship is relegated to the division of labor and industry fields which Northeast Indian women are often working in, which includes; the beauty, hospitality, and healthcare sectors.¹⁸

Nursing is another profession which women from the Northeast have been increasingly engaging in over the last three decades. Many of them who are not absorbed in the government hospitals are moving out of the region into metropolitan cities for jobs in the private healthcare sector. However, today these women who have struggled against all odds to move

out of their villages and break into the industry are now facing not just the loss of livelihoods but also safe spaces away from their homes.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has pushed aside tackling racism as a non-essential undertaking, while focusing on more “essential” work such as covering up protest art around the country.

A majority of these female migrants from the Northeast region, now living across different cities in India, are being subjected to a twin crisis of racial discrimination and long-term unemployment. However, a vast number of them do not want to return to their home regions for the fear that they would not be able to come back to their workplaces if the situation improves. Moreover, when the spas or hotels open, given the state of the economy, limited opportunities will be available.¹⁹ That would mean the loss of livelihoods and financial independence as well as their hard-earned freedom.

State Response and Redressal

On March 24, 2020, the Member of Parliament (MP) from Ladakh, Mr. Jamyang Tsering Namgyal, while sharing the viral video of two boys from Nagaland pleading to the security of a store in Mysore,²⁰ tweeted, “We are not Corona! We were, are and will be Indian always. #StopRacialProfiling.”²¹ The only Northeastern representative in the Union Cabinet of Indian government, Kiren Rijiju, who is a Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh and India’s Minister of State for Minority Affairs, also tweeted the same day, “I’m sad to see such racial discrimination in many parts of India. Anyone who ever discriminates people of other communities, region, or race, is the real enemy virus. All-State

Govt. must take strict action as per the direction of the Govt. of India.”²²

Earlier, the Ministry of Home Affairs (North East Division) on March 21, issued a notice to all states and union territories on the “Harassment of people from the Northeast.”²³ The office memorandum reads, “It has come to notice of the Ministry that people from North East have been facing harassment after the occurrence of Covid-19 in the country. There have been cases where people of the Northeast including athletes and sportspersons have been harassed by linking them to Covid-19. This is racially discriminatory, inconvenient and painful to them.” The Ministry requested that all law enforcing agencies should “be sensitized to take appropriate action in cases of harassment when these are reported.”²⁴ Many Chief Ministers of the Northeastern states seem to have taken the repeated incidents of harassment seriously and have requested their counterparts and the concerned state police to take necessary action.

During a video-conference between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Ministers of Indian states on April 11, 2020, the Chief Minister of Manipur, N. Biren Singh, raised the issue of Northeast Indian citizens facing racial slurs and unnecessary harassment amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Biren also pleaded to the Chief Ministers to look after the needs of the Northeast people stranded in their respective states, and “requested the Prime Minister to direct the States to do the needful to stop harassment of Northeastern people.”²⁵

To reassure the people of India, the Prime Minister on April 19, tweeted that “Covid-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together.”²⁶ This was the first time that a massive condemnation of an incident of racism as taken note of by political heads from the Northeast and Ladakh, who unanimously requested the central government to take action. However, this said, in the absence of a law against racism and racial discrimination in India, the published

advisory as well as the online condemnation of general harassment may serve as little more than a symbolic act.

During times such as these with the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has pushed aside tackling racism as a non-essential undertaking, while focusing on more “essential” work such as covering up protest art around the country.²⁷

Racism is not considered a major problem affecting India which is why the Constitution does not explicitly state laws protecting people against racism. Section 153(A) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) is the only one that takes cognizance of this.²⁸ Police usually invoke Section 354 of the Indian Penal Code (assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty) and Section 509 (insult to the modesty of women) if the victim is a woman, but there are no provisions when the victim is a male, adding that the usage of offensive and racially abusive terms such as “momo” and “chinki” are not defined as offences under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989.²⁹ Further, not all “East Asian looking Indians,” such as the Meitei or Tibetans, are listed as Scheduled Tribes to be covered under the Prevention of Atrocities Act and the police are at loss over which sections or which laws to invoke given the legal vacuum against acts of racism and racial discrimination.

Conclusion

When we start looking for the stories of Northeast Indian women, it is hardly a surprise to find that their voices are lost in array of other challenges that the country is facing, particularly during the time of a pandemic. As we look even closer and locate the women suffering from the said prejudice, we realize that their daily struggles are barely recorded. The disregard for the plight that the northeastern community faces is reflected in various state policies, the lack of redressal mechanisms, as well as the lack of institutional acknowledgement of their struggles.

The persistence of racism should send a strong message that the current legal framework is inadequate to ward-off overt acts of racial discrimination and,

therefore, necessitates a strong anti-racism law for a more qualified national integration. In addition, the success of such legislation will depend on the ability of the law-enforcing agencies and criminal justice system to operationalize its objective. The ongoing effort to strengthen the legal framework against racism in India should be seen as just the beginning of a formal attempt to deal with overt acts. There is a long road ahead to institutionally address the many experiences of covert or structural forms of racism, including institutionalized racism that permeates through the everyday lives of Northeast Indians. However, no single provision or legislation will effectively work unless people actually believe that race is just a physical feature and not a proof of their “moral” character. ■

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