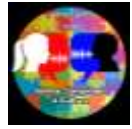


## **COVID-19 and Racial Discrimination: A New Social Challenge**

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In the wake of Covid-19, racial discrimination towards the people from the North-Eastern India has acquired new heights. The lack of cultural understanding among the mainland Indian communities has always manifested itself in slurs and attacks that have increased at an alarming rate. Based on the origin of the virus, and its highly infectious nature, this pandemic has been highly racialized and stigmatized around the world. In a country which was already grappling with this social problem, profiling Asians or mongoloid looking individuals as a ‘suspect’ carrier of the virus has all the way more cornered them, thereby making them social victims. Such marginalization has reached such an extent that various North-Eastern people, who share the same kind of physical attributes like the Chinese, are often stamped as ‘Chinese’ and carriers of Covid-19, although many hails from the North-Eastern states like Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur. This is very much like the Islamophobia which emerged right after the incident of 9/11, and this has been termed as “China phobia”. This phobia went to such an extent that the Indian government banned and urged the Indian people to uninstall a total of 45 Chinese apps which are not supposed to be used by the common people anymore, although many of them were quite user friendly and small in size. We also must not forget that these Chinese goods were very cheap in price and therefore a hefty number of Indians who are below the middle-income group bracket largely preferred Chinese products, not only electronic but other Chinese goods as well which are cheaper in price in comparison to their Indian counterparts. But apart from this technological aspect, the kind of social inequity these North-Eastern people are facing worldwide is something really alarming. Many of them who were already used to racial slurs like “chinki”, “Momo”, “Chinese”; now became “corona”. Thus, incidents of harassing and ridiculing hapless citizens, just on the basis of their ethnicity, appeared in the press and social media from every corner of the country.

The North-East has historically been associated with in-migration from mainland India and beyond. Work being the principal reason for out migration. These migrants, from all age groups are employed in various service sectors like BPOs, restaurants, shopping malls, nursing or spas. We also must not forget that the single largest common language speaking community is the Chinese community and they are residing in various parts of the world apart from the far east zone. If we take a closer look on cities like Kolkata, various Chinese



people have been residing in areas like the Bentinck Street, Territti Bazaar and China Town (Tangra) for long period of time. But while discussing about the migrants or the prejudice that a considerable section of the mainlanders harbors about the North-Eastern people, most of us are not putting enough emphasis on the Chinese community residing in the same city, who are very much like the daily wage earners of China Town or the street food sellers of Territi Bazaar or the group who, for generations, are engaged with the business of dentistry or shoe making in Bentinck Street. So, as the virus led to the spread of this pandemic, various tanneries had to shut down for an indefinite period of time, making these hapless daily wage earners financially vulnerable. The things that should be knocking our concerns right now are – what about the people who make shoes to earn their bread and butter or what about those Momo and dim sum and sausage sellers of Territi Bazaar? Perhaps the dentures of Bentinck Street are now trying to distinguish between laugh and grin.

With the increasing incidence of racism against Asian or mongoloid looking individuals in different parts of the world with the Covid-19 outbreak, the World Health Organization (WHO) took the lead in sensitizing and clarifying how the virus spread do not discriminate between human beings and that the North-Eastern people are victims of the same deadly virus. Yet such discriminations were overt acts of racial prejudice that primarily stems from the non-recognition of North-Eastern Indians. During the pandemic, the fights and the protests by the North-Eastern community with the narrow mindset of the rest of the Indians was as challenging as fighting this novel Corona virus. It was a fight not only against the presumption of being “non-Indian” but also to get due recognition and acceptance as “equal Indians”. The absence of stringent anti-racism laws may have resulted in the pervasiveness of overt acts of racism during this pandemic. Various North-Eastern people have reflected upon this harassment and have thus shared their experiences from post lockdown phase.

- A student further reflected how calling names has been part of the daily lived experience of the North-Easterners in Delhi, were they have been constantly been associated with a germ and how he/she felt like an outcaste.
- Another student from Nagaland, residing in Delhi expressed similar fears while going out of the house to get essentials. She has currently been sticking to online buying only since spending a little more money is better than becoming a victim of a racial attack.
- A 24-year-old woman from Sikkim, living in Kolkata, narrated how she was asked by the hospitals to undergo screening for Covid-19 before being examined. Neither did



she exhibit any symptoms of viral fever, nor did she have any travel history, yet she was sent to an isolation ward where the doctor's first question was, whether she was from China or not.

However, such actions are best understood on the structural elements that underpin Indian societies. The legal measures to address this social problem may reduce overt acts of racism. But addressing covert racial acts, which are structural in nature, is still a long way to go.

In Mahabharata, it was constantly said that any human being should be judged by his/her deeds and not by their ethnicity. In recent past, epic-based soaps have gained immense popularity, but it seems that people have forgotten to implement the ideals that they have worshipped, over the ages, in epics, myths and legends. Consequently, such marginalization of north-eastern people is further submerging into the spiral of silence.

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