






**Racial Prejudice and Gender Discrimination against Northeast Indians amidst COVID-19**  
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# **Racial Prejudice and Gender Discrimination against Northeast Indians amidst COVID-19**

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## **Abstract**

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic has been largely racialized. With its origin rooted in China, Asians across the globe experienced labelling to be responsible for the pandemic. Asians or mongoloid looking individuals suffered discrimination, and contempt worldwide. In India, the pandemic restored and re-established the social problem i.e. racialism against the Northeast Indians which has been tackled over the years. While most of the Indians have non-mongoloid looks, the Northeast Indians are mainly Asiatic race. As such, they have Asian looks though Indian in blood. The fight of the Northeast Indians has been double. They have to fight against the virus as everyone, and against the negative mindset of their fellow Indians against them. The Indian government, as such, promptly established a committee to look into the matter. But there has been no law against it which makes it hard to act accordingly. Besides the racial affliction, there existed gender discrimination which doubled the affliction of the women of northeast Indians.

**Keywords:** Racism; gender discrimination; Covid-19; Northeast Indian

## **Introduction**

The WHO China Country Office was informed of pneumonia on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019. On the issue of the outbreak of the Coronavirus, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (2020) sent a letter urgently to all the members of the G-20, suggesting an emergency virtual summit to respond to the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though every country has their own respective strategies of response, the UN launched a US\$2 billion-dollar global humanitarian plan to fund the fight against Covid-19 as a response in the world's poorest countries. On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) proclaimed the outbreak as a 'pandemic' examining 'the alarming levels of spread and severity'. Two weeks after this declaration, Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister announced a nationwide lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to be lasted for 21 days, to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. He made this announcement in television addressed to the people of the nation. It was brief but emotional speech in which he informed the people that 'social distancing' has been the only course of action to alleviate it. On grounds that the WHO confirmed 118,000 certified cases, and 4,291 deaths in 114 countries, the government of India imposed strict rules curbing travel to other countries on March 11, 2020. However, the government took action in cessation of "all existing visas, except diplomatic, official,

UN/international organizations, employment, project visas” till April 15, 2020 (The Economic Times, 2021). At this time, the central government, and all the state governments as well schemed ways for the NRIs to the way home to India, and their respective states. In India, the earliest reported case of Covid-19 happened on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020 in Kerala.

India is a home for non-informal settlers, and they undergo a certain amount of struggles in these critical times. The government divided the informal settlements (the slum) into notified, and non-notified slums. However, the non-notified slum constitutes 59% of the whole slum dwellers, and these settlements belonged to the urban areas. According to investigations, 95% of positive cases are found in urban settlements. Highlighting the lifestyle of the slum dwellers, they usually lived in a shack and worked in the informal sector which comprises 80% of both the sectors (formal, and informal). They experienced adversities regarding water, sanitation, and other healthcare services, besides inadequate housing. From the 2011 census, it is found that one in six urban settlers resided in a slum, and 35% of them do not have the opportunity to acquire clean water. They barely fed their stomach, 26% of slum dwellers have to hunt for water outside their home, and many of them need to go more than about 100 meters to fetch water; in addition, most of them do not even own soap which brings to light that washing hands often, and sanitizing themselves is inaccessible for the non-settlers. A basic and mandatory need for someone is a luxurious lifestyle for someone.

The International Labor Organization has declared that “in low- and middle-income countries, hard-hit sectors have a high proportion of workers in informal employment, and workers with limited access to health services, and social protection.” The lockdown has caused the shutdown of all sorts of economic activity; ‘working from home’ had been the only suggestion. With this suggestion, those who depend on daily labor immediately have to face unemployment, and a study approved that almost half of the informal settlers faced this problem. As aforementioned, 80% of the entire residents worked in the informal sector which depended on daily labor. Working from home meant unemployment, and increased poverty for them.

The Public Distribution System (PDS), which is the government support system in times of pandemic, though helpful, have been very slow. However, people getting help have to form a queue and congested lanes. These can, therefore, be the factor leading to the positive cases of Covid. Due to high population, employment crisis, and poor health services, these settlers are prone to chronic diseases, and pandemic like Covid, and SARS (which appeared in 2012).

It is the then US President, Donald Trump who used the expression “Chinese virus” to label the coronavirus which fortify xenophobia, and intolerance against Asians. He used the word more than twenty times between March 16 and March 30. However, it promptly has a negative impact on the Asian-Americans living in the USA. They immediately faced discrimination based on their Asian looks. Therefore, the Europeans, and Americans, therefore, generalized Asians to be responsible for dispersing the virus across the globe. The expression “Chinese virus” exemplified racism. On accusations of racism, President Trump cleaned himself by stating that he only said so because the virus originates from China. There are approximately reported 100 hate crimes against the Asian Americans as this virus sweeps the US (Kelley, 2020). To respond to this crime of discrimination, the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council with the organization Chinese for Affirmative Action, and the Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State University

initiated the needful 'Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center' on March 19, 2020 to response to prejudice and hatred against the Asian Americans. It reported various incidents of physical torture, and bullying against the Asian Americans. Even in other parts of the globe other than the USA like India, the spirit of racism spreads in the course of Covid-19 pandemic. Discrimination on grounds of racism existed against the northeast Indians who have Asian looks.

Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) contends racism includes 'prejudice, discrimination or hatred at someone because of their color, ethnicity or national origin'. However, this paper tends to look into two kinds of discrimination against the Northeast Indians in the course of COVID-19 outbreak in India. To begin with, racial discrimination happened promptly nationwide, mostly against the northeast Indians. Since they are mongoloid races, they looked more familiar with the Chinese rather than their fellow Indians. There are instances of hate crimes against the northeast Indians which followed the outbreak of the novel coronavirus which originated from China. This problem of racism often arose previously, but still there are no laws which could restrict, ban or protect the victims. India took pride in holding secularism in such a diverse state. One of the characteristics of religion is holding superstitions. Some superstitions have been driven away by education and modernity, but some still existed. In the context of this pandemic as well, some mainland Indians feared getting near the northeast Indians. They generalized them to come from China, and bring the virus, even all Chinese or everyone rooted in Wuhan are not to be attributed. Even the Chinese died from this virus like everyone else across the globe.

In addition, gender discrimination existed during the critical times of COVID-19 pandemic. It is a permanent issue in a strict patriarchal country like India. However, it is unfortunate that women from the northeast region of India got to undergo two kinds of discrimination besides the struggles from the pandemic. As aforementioned, India is a patriarchal society where women are taught to remain silent in any situation. Being born into women is regarded as a curse as being born into the caste of the untouchables. Over the years, even women accepted their ill-fated condition and acted as a servant. With the introduction of feminism, women empowerment, and human rights, women's condition has risen a bit. But still, there are people who cling to conventional thoughts about women. These immoralities vividly came to light during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Racial Prejudice against Northeast Indians before the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Northeast India comprises eight states, viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. 'Northeast' has its origin in the colonial era in Alexander Mackenzie's Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal, which is produced in 1869 at the appeal of Sir William Grey, the Lieutenant-Governor. The memorandum stated:

"The north-east frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense it embraces the whole of the hill ranges north, east, and south of the Assam valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges" (Mackenzie, 2007, p.1).

Samson (2017) states that the Northeast Indians are often given labels such as “chinky”, “chini”, “Nepali”, “Chinese”, etc, though “chinky” remains permanent. In mainland India, they are often asked “Are you from Nepal/China”, rather than “Where do you come from?” This statement declared the rejection of the northeast Indian as an Indian within the Indian Territory. According to Chambers 20th Dictionary, New Edition, Chinky is an informal and disrespectful label given to Chinese (Kirkpatrick ed., 1984, p. 220). According to Cambridge International Dictionary of English, it is an offensive British jargon to mean “a Chinese person” (Procter, 1995, p. 227). It is also constructed in British slang which meant “a restaurant serving Chinese food” (Procter, 1995, p. 227). Chink is elucidated as “a contemptuous or patronizing term” by Webster’s New World College Dictionary, New Millennium (Agnes, 2000, p. 256). Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English explains chink as “a very offensive word for a Chinese person” (Hornby, 2005, p. 257).

Generally, the Northeast Indians residing in the mainland and other parts of India are subjected to violence, and discrimination due to their difference in their appearances, stating that their looks are not “Indian” enough. On January 29, 2014, Nido Taniam was maltreated to death in Lajpat Nagar, Delhi on grounds that he looked dissimilar from the typical Indians. In 2016, two bachelors from Mizoram were abused severely in Bangalore for not using the local language for communication. Two Naga students had been abused for hours by local men of Gurgaon on grounds that they (the students) do not belong there. They stated, “If you northeast people come here, we will kill you” (Sharma, 2020).

However, it is true that the northeast Indians have mongoloid looks that resemblance association with that of the Chinese, which is the cause of the racial discrimination. Subir Bhaumik has rightly put it forward that “the North East is where India looks less and less India and more and more like the highlands of South East Asia” (2009, p.259). It is no doubt that the northeast Indians look distinct and different from the mainland Indians but that does not make them less Indian. There is biasness from the end of the media as well in telling stories of the northeast people to the mainland Indians. It is them who gave a bad notion of Northeast India to the public. They mainly portrayed the negative aspects of Northeast India, and passed over the beauties, and amiabilities of the inmates. Due to this reason, it is no wonder people in mainland India draw negative conclusions about the northeast Indians without scrutinizing them. Therefore, ‘racism’ is always a sensitive topic in India. It can be easily triggered; however, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered greatly at its onset as well.

### **Racial Prejudice against Northeast Indians at the Onset of the COVID-19**

When the central government of India imposed lockdown, shops were closed down, and jobs went online. These are the times when solidarity is needed but it is the time when the northeast Indians experienced discrimination. At the onset of COVID-19, they were treated as a foreigner in their own homeland. There are many of them who resided outside the northeast region due to employment, education, and other reasons. They were evicted from their residents, and flats due to their mongoloid appearances. ‘Are you from China’ is a common question asked of them. Rights and Risks Analysis Group (RRAG), which is an organization based in New Delhi documented a report titled ‘Coronavirus Pandemic: India’s Mongoloid Looking People Face Upsurge of Racism’

which contained 22 proclaimed hate crimes, and racial prejudice between February 7, and March 25 (Dixit, 2020). As aforementioned racial prejudice and violence against the northeast people is not only the pandemic phenomenon, the pandemic just triggered it. They have been labelled as "corona", and "chinki" perpetually.

They have been denied entrance into various public places, and they are forcibly let to quarantine themselves although they showed no symptoms of the virus. Dorjee, a cancer patient who resided in the Mulund society in Mumbai was denied entrance by the security officer fearing that he might be contaminated with the disease. This happened due to his mongoloid appearance (Ibid). However, racial discrimination happened mainly out of ignorance, and it is an act which leads to the violation of one's rights. In this context as well, the persecutor violated rights written in Articles 14, and 21 of the Indian Constitution, which is included in the Fundamental Rights. In the onset of the imposed lockdown by the government of India, there were queues lined up in every store. It is in these queues that northeast Indians are often looked at distinctively. Therefore, everyone feared starving at this point in time. During this critical time, problems are added for the northeast people as racism got them problems in laying their heads, and feeding their stomach. The existence of the novel coronavirus does not wipe off the existence of other diseases. Critical illnesses such as kidney failure, cancer, brain tumour, etc. still remain existed. Northeast people having these critical illnesses other than COVID-19 experienced issues due to racism. Racism has various consequences, depending on the individual. Racism against those having life-threatening diseases can lead to death. In most common cases, it leads to emotional instability, leading to various mental disorders. There are people who got evicted by their landlords out of racism. Mostly, travellers are not welcomed and greeted positively in every state, so travelling around is not the right option. Many of them got the chance to get back home, and there are people who stayed back. In these times, most people do not want visitors, and many companies and corporations cut half the salaries. So, there grows the root of depression and anxiety in the lives of people who got evicted from their homes, whose salaries got reduced, and who faced discrimination in every walk of their life.

Alana Golmei, a lawyer, and reformer who initiated, and run the North East Support Centre, and Helpline affirmed the increasing number of complaints during pandemic on grounds of racial discrimination by saying that "I used to get perhaps one or two cases every week before. Now I'm getting four-five calls and messages an afternoon." On April 8, an unfortunate thing happened in Star Market in Hyderabad. Two Manipuri youths from Senapati, and Chandel districts were not let to set foot in the market. Then one of them filmed the incident, and posted on social media, captioned "These people didn't allow us to enter the mall to buy some grocery because our face look different." One of them who came from Chandel district stated:

"It is very humiliating when someone calls us foreigners when we are born Indian citizens. We explained to them that we are Indians, and showed our aadhar card and identity card but they refused to recognize them. But stopping people from buying food just because of our looks is a crime against humanity" (The Northeast Today, 2020).

On April 14, a terrible incident happened in South Delhi. Two Manipuri youths had faced discrimination during their grocery shopping, and as a result, the victims called the police. Surprisingly, the abuse did not stop; rather they were labelled 'Chinese', 'Chinki', 'Corona' in front

of the police. Later on, they resorted to calling the Northeast Helpline phone number, and three SPUNER police personnel grabbed the alleged who flooded water over them (Imphal Free Press Bureau, 2020). Another incident happened in Bangalore on April 20. Two policemen tried to maintain social distancing but it turned out that they hit only the northeasterners in the name of maintaining distance. One of the victims voiced his question: "There are so many people gathering and walking in this street why only us? Why hit people only after seeing their face, isn't that racist?"

However, the Northeast Indians have been the major target of racism during COVID-19 pandemic, as it has always been. They are the victims of the ignorance of the mainland Indians. Brennan (2021) states that due to racism, and racial discrimination in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the northeast Indians underwent a number of additional struggles, and illnesses. As such, depression and anxiety are detected in many individuals of their community. Though it is a mental illness, it makes the physical body weak, and prone to diseases. Especially depression is associated with chronic diseases like diabetes, asthma, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and arthritis. In the context of COVID-19 as well, these mental illnesses make a person prone to the disease. So, all in all, racism affected the physical health of a person and is a threat in times of pandemic. In this context, racial discrimination is a threat to the northeast Indians as it sourced mental illnesses to them. Most northeast Indians residing in mainland India have a purpose of employment, and education (mostly higher studies); and these are the people experiencing mental illness out of racism.

The ill effect of racial injustice against the Northeast Indians in the course of the Covid pandemic is that it destroyed the unity of a nation. The pandemic is a critical time for everyone. It is a time when extra effort is needed to have unity, and solidarity to fight the disease. Though the UN, and some developed countries lend a helping hand to impoverished countries, each country has to tackle their problems within its boundaries. Therefore, each country has a foe to handle in times of pandemic. So, setting aside every other internal problem, everyone in a nation has to stand in unity, and solidarity to stay alive, and conquer their enemy. In India as well, though the cases are declining steadily, there are over thirty-four million confirmed cases, and over four hundred thousand total deaths as on October 20, 2021 (WHO, 2021). These statistics showed the need to join hands, and get united as a nation. In the midst of these struggles, the elements of racial discrimination that happened within the nation are a threat, a hint of the tip of the iceberg of destruction. It is clear that at this point in time, it is impossible to handle the pandemic without shouldering other states of a nation. By showing racial discrimination against the northeast Indians, the mainland Indians destructed the spirit of unity with the northeast states of India. To mention, judging someone based on their physical appearance is a sort of ignorance. Furthermore, treating someone as trash, and ignoring their humanity is an abuse of Human Rights that is taken as a serious misconduct of the Indian Constitution, wherein the Fundamental Rights of the Indian Constitution solely discussed Human Rights.

### **Gender Discrimination against Northeast Indian Women during the COVID-19 in India**

Gender discrimination and gender disparity is a hot-button issue in India. Disparity increases against the subaltern women. The discussion of racial injustice in the midst of Covid-19 shows that much of the discrimination falls upon women, particularly. Women are often the subjects of

the immoralities of men. During the pandemic as well, women of northeast India underwent two types of discrimination, racial discrimination, and gender disparity. Though they are regarded as weak, and fragile, they are subjected to violence, maltreatment, and oppression. It is surprising that even women victimized their fellow women.

In one of the reports stated by RRAG (Rights and Risks Analysis Group), on March 22, 2020, a Manipuri woman passed a group of men on her way home to Delhi who gave vulgar comments. When she protested, she was given names such as "corona", and spat juice on her. Another incident happened in Ahmedabad where northeast girls were asked to vacate their rented apartment which they paid in advance on grounds that they were accused of spreading coronavirus (Pant, 2020). News18 (2020) published that on April 6, 2020, a biker spat with his betel nuts on a Manipuri girl in Mumbai. Regarding this, the National Commission for Women posted on their Facebook page: "Yet another case of racial discrimination amid #Covid19Outbreak, a miscreant spat on a Northeastern girl today in Kalina Market area in Mumbai. NCW will look into this matter for appropriate action." On February 10, a Naga woman studying at Tata Institute of Social Sciences was calling upon a friend at Chembur in Mumbai. She wore a black mask, and she was suspected to be Chinese, and spreading the virus; however, she was filmed by one of the residents (Times of India, 2020). Hindustan Times Correspondent (2020) shared another tragic story on how a Northeast student of Delhi University went to a shop in Kamla Nagar on March 6. On her way, two men threw balloons at her, labelling her "coronavirus". Right after the Indian Prime Minister declared the Janata Curfew on March 22, 2020, a Manipuri MPhil student studying in Delhi University went out for grocery shopping. On her way, a man labelled her 'corona', and spat on her body with his chewed betel nuts. The founder of North East Support Centre and Helpline Alana Golmei stated:

"When it comes to racial abuse, each male and females are faced with it however women are more prone, due to the fact perpetrators sense they can break out with it without entering into a fight. Of all the calls and lawsuits I've obtained, about 60 in line with cent come from ladies."

The National Commission for Women became aware of a post in social media on April 24 which said that "wherein few northeast girls were brutally attacked, abused by a lady & her daughters living at Porvorim, Goa." It further stated that "local police did not file any complaints," however "instead threatened them to refrain from registering any complaint."

These are few of the cases of reported racial injustice during the Covid pandemic in India. There are still many more cases, and many victims do not have the audacity to report to the enforcing agencies, wherein the community discouraged them to suppress themselves and keep silent. This resulted in unreported crimes of racism.

### **Response of Racism before and after the Pandemic**

As mentioned earlier, racism against northeast people has always been a hot-button issue. Though actual no-racism laws have not been constructed, there are some measures taken by the Government of India prior to the pandemic. After the demise of Nido Tania on January 29, 2014, a committee consisting of 12 members under the convenorship of MP Bezbaruah was appointed



to see the matter (Bezbaruah, 2014). To prevent any racial injustice, against the northeast people, the Committee suggested new sections to add to the Indian Penal Code - 'to include racial discrimination, taunt, and words that reflect racial prejudices that hurt the sentiment of a particular group.' As such, six years after the death of Nido Tania, The Criminal Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2019 was initiated in the Rajya Sabha on February 7, 2020. The bill has introduced section 153 C and 505 A in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which reads:

"After section 153 B, the following new section shall be inserted, namely:- 153 C. Whoever on grounds of religion, race, caste or community, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, place of birth, residence, language disability or tribe- (a) uses gravely threatening words either spoken or written, signs, visible representations within the hearing or sight of a person with the intention to cause or knowledge that it is likely to cause, fear or alarm; or (b) advocates hatred by words either spoken or written, signs, visible representations, that causes or is likely to cause incitement to violence; shall be punishable with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both."

"In the Penal Code, after section 505 the following new section shall be inserted, namely:- 505 A. Whoever on grounds of religion, race, caste or community, sex, gender, sexual orientation, place of birth, residence, language, disability or tribe, intentionally or knowingly uses, in public, words, statements containing rumour or alarming news or displays any writing, sign, or other visible representation which is or is likely to be gravely threatening, or derogatory; (i) within the hearing or sight of a person, causing fear or alarm; or (ii) with the intent to provoke or knowledge that it is likely to provoke the use of violence, against that person or another, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years or with fine, or with both."

It is worth mentioning that after the demise of Richard Loitam, a Manipuri student, and Dana Sylvia Sangma, a Khasi student on April 2012, the Ministry of Home Affairs provided a memorandum on May 10, 2012, and called for 'Zero Tolerance Policy' on atrocities on the Northeast Indians, and that actions would be taken against police officers for the negligence of duties in these matters. However, it takes necessary measures such that it reduced hold up in the investigation of cases concerning brutalities against the STs. It noted the in-depth study of Delhi Policy Groups that only as less as about 13% of complaint cases got integrity, such that it has called for the North East Special Police Unit for 'speedy justice in criminal cases' concerning the Northeast Indians.

Mr. Jamyang Tsering Namgyal, the Member of Parliament (MP) (2020) from Ladakh had tweeted, sharing the viral video of two Naga boys who pleaded to the security of a store in Mysore :

"We are not Corona! We were, are and will be Indian always. #StopRacialProfiling."

The Northeastern delegate in the Union Cabinet of Indian government, Kiren Rijiju, a Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh and India's Minister of State for Minority Affairs, also tweeted that day saying, "I'm sad to see such racial discrimination in many parts of India. Anyone who ever discriminates against people of other communities, regions, or race, is the real enemy virus. All-State Govt. must take strict action as per the direction of the Govt. of India" (Scroll.in, 2020). Prior to this, the Ministry of Home Affairs (North East Division) on March 21, has given a notice to all

states and union territories on the “Harassment of people from the Northeast” (News18, 2020). The office memorandum contends,

“It has come to the 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 urged all law enforcement agencies should “be sensitized to take appropriate action in cases of harassment when these are reported” (Ibid). Most of the Chief Ministers of the Northeastern states seem to have taken the harassment seriously and they have requested the concerned state police to take needful action. In a video-conferencing of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Chief Ministers of Indian states on April 11, 2020, N. Biren Singh, the current Chief Minister of Manipur raised this issue requesting the other Chief Ministers to look into the matter of the stranded Northeast people in their respective states, and he ‘requested the Prime Minister to direct the States to do the needful to stop harassment of NE people’ (FPSJ Review of Arts and Politics, 2021). Managed by the Special Police Unit for North Eastern Region (SPUNER) recommended by the Bezbaruah Committee, North East Task Force has been formed with the concerned people aimed at reaching out for the Northeast people in critical condition during the lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

The outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is both minuses and pluses. In India, it reheated the spirit of racism which has cooled down for a bit. There is permanence in the fact that India is united in diversity. This study revealed two things. To begin with, there is always a gap in the mindset of Indians. The northeast Indians are less accepted by their fellow Indians due to their physical appearance. In addition, though there are disparities between Indians, the Indians are always there in solidarity to fix and unite once again. Racism shown in the onset of COVID-19 has been one of the worst in the issue, and it is one of the fastest incidents in which action was taken against it.

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