
CRISIS AND CONFLICT: INDIA'S NORTHEAST AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Introduction

The Seven Sisters of India or India's northeast belt comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The region is home to a variety of tribes and communities that are diverse and distinct in their culture, language, traditions and values. But the people of this region have faced the worst of racial discrimination in India by their fellow citizens. This discrimination is often supplemented with slurs and derogatory terms. When the COVID-19 disease was declared as a global pandemic, a halt had been created to the daily activities of the people. People had to take extra care and precaution, and the situation had become a crisis. A chaos had been created in the surroundings for healthcare, groceries and other necessities. While the people of the mainland were concerned with steps to defeat the crisis, the people of the northeast living in mainland had to combat with the increased discrimination. Such a situation of a pandemic demands a unified feeling among the citizens, but there was an absence of it. A stigma was attached to the people of northeast when they stepped out of their homes to buy necessities. The objective of this study is to present the findings of racial discrimination towards the northeast Indians that denied them healthcare and other necessities based on their physical attributes. The research paper also aims to discuss about the role of past illegal immigration of Bangladeshis in 1971, CAA and NRC of 2019, past separatist movements, media and negligence on part of the government that has created a large gap between the northeast and the mainland. This blockage of knowledge has led to people being ignorant and has resulted in the racism as can be seen in the findings of the following paper. The paper aims to address why the people have failed to address the issue in the past that has resulted in such a predicament.

Methodology

The following research paper is based on the doctrinal method of data collection. The paper's findings have been collected from various journals and books that focus on the topic. The

findings and recommendations from the official document of Bezbaruah Committee. Other sources include articles and news from websites like The Hindu, Research Gate and Unacademy. Some findings can also be traced through various YouTube videos by The Print, The Quint and The Indian Express.

Findings

The condition of northeast Indians residing in the mainland was very different than the rest of the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the other citizens tackled with the global pandemic, the people coming from the northeast had to combat the other pandemic which stemmed out of the hatred of their own fellow citizens. The people coming from the northeast region of India have faced derogatory slurs over the years, which was more recently heightened with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that this racial discrimination is not something which has come up recently but has been prevalent for years. Even in the past, several derogatory marks have been made towards northeast Indians particularly for their facial features. One of the most common racial slurs used for the northeast Indians was “Chinki”. This created such an impact on the northeast Indians that the government of India had to ban the use of it and term it as a punishable offence. More recently during the pandemic the racial slur of “Chinki” was replaced with the term “Corona”. It is because most of the people concluded that since the source of Corona was from Wuhan, China and the facial features of the northeast Indians vary from the mainland and resemble more with the East Asian countries, it is the people of northeast India who are responsible for bringing COVID-19 into the country. It is a completely false narrative set by some people as the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the state of Kerala on January 27, 2020,¹ and it was not until March 24, 2020, that the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the northeast state of Manipur.²

There were several cases of racism which were reported, and they included verbal abuse and harassment, physical assault, denied healthcare facilities, and restriction on entry of public spaces etc. Alana Gomei, a lawyer and social activist shared pictures of a Manipuri woman who was out in public to buy some groceries, when a man riding on a motorcycle came, spat

¹ Perappadan, B. S. (2021, November 28). India's first coronavirus infection confirmed in Kerala. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indias-first-coronavirus-infection-confirmed-in-kerala/article61638034.ece>

² Laithangbam, I. (2020, April 6). Manipur's first COVID-19 case declared cured. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/manipurs-first-covid-19-case-declared-cured/article31270725.ece>

on her and called her “corona” before fleeing the scene on March 22, 2020.³ The case was reported ThePrint as well. Meiyang Chang, an Indian actor and television host reported that two men on a motorcycle called him “corona”. The racism affected the individuals to an extent where 300 nurses resigned from their jobs in Kolkata and left for Manipur, as reported by ANI News (May 21, 2020).⁴ During the pandemic, a special train to the northeast with 1300 passengers from Haryana was attacked brutally and a bus from Madhya Pradesh carrying passengers to the northeast was attacked too, as reported by The Hindu on May 24, 2020.⁵ Several students were kicked out of their hostels and various citizens were denied entry in public spaces such as restaurants and hospitals, as the public held them responsible for the pandemic. In Ahmedabad, as reported by The Print, the police had to intervene to stop the wrongful eviction of northeast girls as their neighbours feared that they possessed corona. The victims said *“In the morning, our neighbour knocked on our door. We asked him ‘What happened?’ He had called everyone from the locality. He was screaming at us and saying we brought the coronavirus here. He asked us to pack our bags and leave immediately”*. A video published by Sushmita Shrestha, reposted by North-Eastern Chronicle, showed that students from Nagaland are being forced to leave their houses in Kolkata and are being mocked and harassed as “Corona Virus”. They said *“The girls were asked to leave the house by the locals. The girls had panicked and called me. As I went to check up on them, the situation had gotten worse. So, we had no choice but to call the police but even the police turned up drunk. As we were being escorted, the locals gathered around and started screaming ‘Go corona go’. Just because we look different does not mean we are not Indians. Please help us. We are Indians too”*. The racism has not only affected the daily lives of the people offline but also online. There have been several derogatory remarks and comments on various individuals belonging to the northeast. Most of these cases have been seen in the metropolitan cities, mainly Delhi and Mumbai. In a public interview conducted by The Print, people reported that they were

³ Krishnankutty, P., & Krishnankutty, P. (2020, March 23). Eyes were burning from the paan, says Manipuri girl called ‘corona’ by Delhi man who spat on her. ThePrint. <https://theprint.in/india/delhi-man-spits-on-manipuri-womans-face-calls-her-corona/386357/#:~:text=The%20incident%20took%20place%20around,and%20called%20her%20%E2%80%9Ccorona%E2%80%9D.>

⁴ Borooah, I. P., Choudhury, S. A., & Das, B. (2022, December 23). *COVID-19 and India’s Northeast*. Taylor & Francis.

http://books.google.ie/books?id=B2aXEAQAQBAJ&pg=PT28&dq=covid+19+and+india%27s+northeast&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

⁵ Special train to northeast attacked in Bihar, returnees abused. (2020, May 24). The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/special-train-to-northeast-attacked-in-bihar-returnees-abused/article31665071.ece>

denied goods while trying to buy them in the shops.⁶ There have been videos circulated which shows the racial discrimination evident in supermarkets.⁷ They are also denied travelling by the cab or auto drivers and if they are allowed, they are charged extra for it. Students from Delhi reported that they were pelted with water balloons, reported by The Indian Express. A research scholar from Delhi University was interviewed by The Indian Express and she expressed her concern for the students, as excessive racism and discrimination during the pandemic feared the students from coming to the university.⁸ In an interview conducted by The Print, an individual from the Northeast, in Ahmedabad, was immediately asked to get herself and her northeast colleagues in the hospital by their other co workers as they feared that they were suffering from Corona based on their physical features. The woman said *"This is total discrimination. They admitted us to the hospital because of the way we look. We do not have any trouble history or any symptoms"*.⁹

The **Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)** commissioned research on hate crimes and racial prejudice against individuals from the northeastern states of India. The study said amid the COVID-19 outbreak last year, people from the region "faced an increased number of acts of hate and prejudices against them". According to 2020 research by the Right and Risks Analysis Group (RRAG), there has been a noticeable increase in racial prejudice against individuals from the region. This information is cited in the study. Between February and March 25, 2020, 22 occurrences of hate crimes or racial discrimination were registered, according to the study. Highest number of cases were reported from the city of Mumbai, Maharashtra. More than 75% of the people of northeast thought that discrimination towards them was mostly motivated by their physical/facial attributes. To an Indian, there is little to no distinction between a person of Northeast and a person of China. Verbal abuse was most common and extreme in the cities of Mumbai, the highest, Pune, Hyderabad, Delhi, Chennai and Bengaluru being the lowest.¹⁰

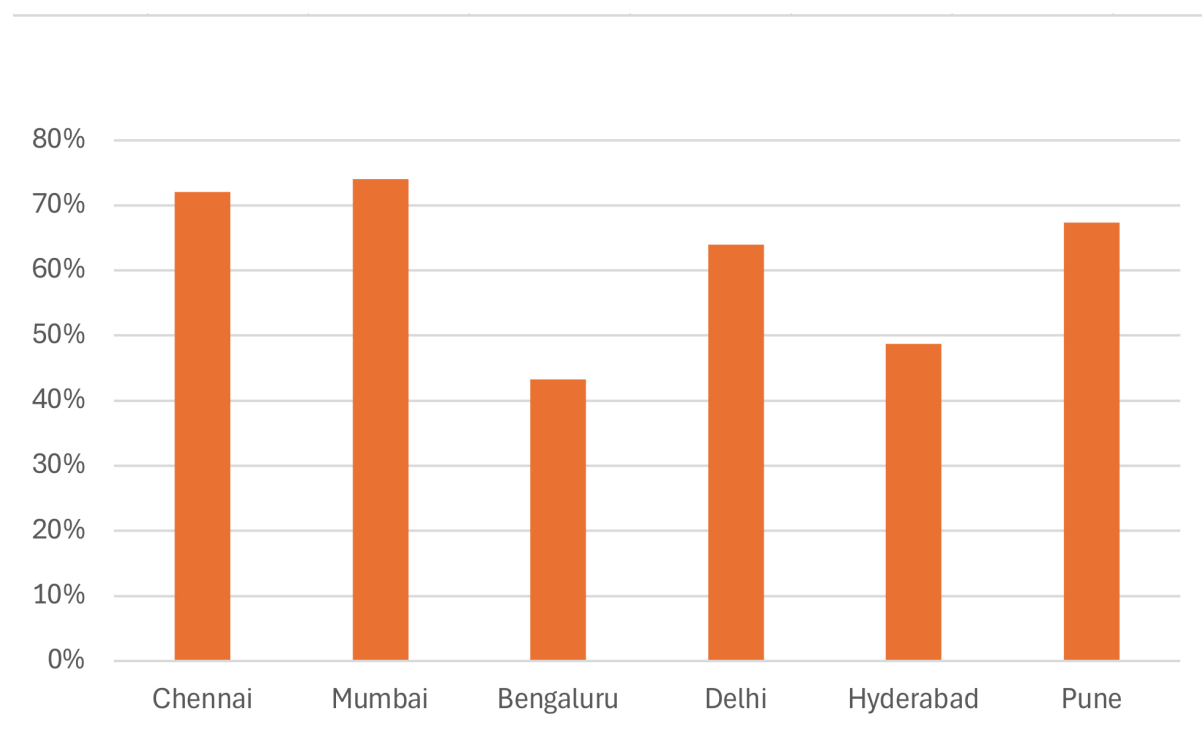
⁶ Covid has made racism against us much worse, say people from North-East in Delhi. (2020, July 9). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from https://youtu.be/8gv3Mt_xxRg?si=fHO78W8231hKaKjs

⁷ Coronavirus India:How People From Northeast Are Being Targeted. (2020, March 11). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from https://youtu.be/Ijp9kSNxTGU?si=smwDqXOKV7IZTG_0

⁸ Coronavirus India:How People From Northeast Are Being Targeted. (2020, March 11). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from https://youtu.be/Ijp9kSNxTGU?si=smwDqXOKV7IZTG_0

⁹ Move over coronavirus, 6 stories of racism against north-east Indians are far worse. (2020, March 28). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from <https://youtu.be/2EY0EXIwgn0?si=fOHfcxnCs4UAAP2l>

¹⁰ Singh, V. (2021, April 12). Northeast citizens faced racial discrimination amid COVID-19 outbreak, says govt. study. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/northeast-citizens-faced-racial-discrimination-amid-covid-19-outbreak-says-govt-study/article34303162.ece>



There was a 32.3% rate of occurrences that were not reported.¹¹ Upto 34% of people said that the police had refused to register a formal complaint. This depicts the flaws in the legal system in addressing this issue of racism and discrimination among the people of the country. In the same interview conducted by The Print, people of the northeast claim that their complaints are not usually registered by the authorities, the police itself does racism, they lack knowledge as well as the victims further get “traumatised” by the police, and therefore no formal case is registered.¹²

Since the issue of racism and discrimination against northeast Indians had been prevalent in the Indian landscape, the government had decided to set up a committee, named the **Bezbaruah Committee**. This committee was set up by the Indian government in February 2014, chaired by Mr. Madan Prasad Bezbaruah, a former IAS officer and member of North Eastern Council. The committee was set up in response to the growing hateful crimes against the northeast people. The objectives of the committee were to take up the issues faced by the northeast

¹¹ Borooah, I. P., Choudhury, S. A., & Das, B. (2022, December 23). COVID-19 and India’s Northeast. Taylor & Francis.

http://books.google.ie/books?id=B2aXEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT28&dq=covid+19+and+india%27s+northeast&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

¹² “Corona” Has Become a Racial Slur For Northeast. (2020, April 16). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from <https://youtu.be/HtwRWLA4Aq8?si=71Qsx6ArisifQSIH>

Indians in the mainland of India and provide recommendations to the government of India that could be implemented to reduce such issues. The committee decided to make a plan and visit the cities of Delhi, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bengaluru, Pune, Mumbai and Kolkata where they would meet the parties who had reported such incidents of hate crime. After consulting several individuals from these cities, the committee prepared a report with recommendations that were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key points mentioned in the report were of racial discrimination, stereotyping, cultural barriers and cultural alienation.¹³

The recommendations of the committee included introduction of a new law to deal with the racism or amend the current section 153C and 509A of Indian Penal Code that could tackle such incidents. Amendment to the section would mean that “any word, gesture or act intended to insult a member of a particular racial group or of any race”. This insult of the other individual could result in 3 years of imprisonment or fine or both. This makes the offence “cognizable” and “non-bailable”. The report also tried to create legal awareness among the northeast individuals. Lawyers from the northeast would be given more preference and made accessible to report and fight against such hate crimes. It suggested the creation of special prosecutors. Awareness among the youth and the representatives of the northeast people in the metropolitan cities. Improvement in the reporting and investigation of such crimes was also recommended. Representation was one of the key recommendations that were made by the committee. It meant that more representation in the legal spheres and bureaucracy would encourage the individuals to come forward and report their crime than being in fear of it. The committee also suggested formation of fast-track courts and a special squad under the jurisdiction of Northeast Special Force Unit. Apart from these, the committee also recommended that awareness and education about the northeast must be made to reduce the hate crimes and cases of racism and discrimination.¹⁴

Despite making such key recommendations, the reality has been very different from what has been implemented on the paper. In October 2018, the Supreme Court expressed its dissatisfaction with the committee after noticing its lack of implementation and how the

¹³ REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE UNDER THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF SHRI M.P. BEZBARUAH TO LOOK INTO THE CONCERNS OF THE NORTH EAST LIVING IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. (2014). Ministry Of Home Affairs. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-08/ReportOfMPBezbaruahCommittee%5B1%5D.PDF>

¹⁴ M.P. Bezbaruah Committee and its Recommendations Issues and Analysis @ abhipedia Powered by ABHIMANU IAS. (n.d.). Abhipedia. https://abhipedia.abhimanu.com/Res_page.aspx?ID=4482

committee had met for only three times in the last four years since submitting its report.¹⁵ It is also essential to note that India has ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1968, so it becomes obligatory for the country to take necessary measures to end this racial discrimination. The lack of arrests during the pandemic for such racist remarks depicts the inadequacies in the implementation of protective laws.

Discussion

Discrimination, in its truest form has been a human trait. It is false to deny that any human is not capable of not treating other people differently. At an individual level, it is very common and part of human nature. But when does this become a social problem? This becomes a problem when such discrimination grows to such an extent that harms the other individuals in the society and in the public sphere. Similarly, in this case, the discrimination had increased to such a volume that it had poisoned the minds of the individuals against the northeast Indians. To find a solution to an existing problem, it is important to analyse the roots of it, from where the issue became a problem. The northeast belt of India has been neglected since the colonial era. The reason for it could be its geographical location as the region, on the global map, is at a distance from the mainland of India. The northeast has been a mine for rich natural resources, lush forests and biodiversity, but this potential has been underdeveloped. The region, despite its potential, sums to only 2.5% of the total Indian economy.¹⁶

This arena has also faced the worst of illegal immigration. In 1971, when East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was under the atrocities of West Pakistan, a large number of people from East Pakistan illegally immigrated to India, mostly in the Seven Sisters, to seek shelter. This illegal immigration from the northeast led to a shortage in the employment opportunities as well as scarcity in resources. There was no firm response from the Indian government to address this issue and instead, this became escalated after the government of India introduced the **CAA (Citizen Amendment Act) and NRC (National Register of Citizens) in 2019**. The CAA, passed in December 2019, aimed to provide the Indian Citizenship to the religious minorities of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who migrated to India before December 31, 2014.¹⁷ This feared a large number of

¹⁵ TodayNE, I. (2022, June 28). The Bezbaruah Committee: Relevance in Corona Times. India Today NE. <https://www.indiatodayne.in/perspective/story/bezbaruah-committee-relevance-corona-times-406040-2020-04-27>

¹⁶ North East India: An Underdeveloped Region with Unbound Potential. (2020, February 29). *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field*, 6(2), 2455–0620.

¹⁷ The Wire: The Wire News India, Latest News, News from India, Politics, External Affairs, Science, Economics, Gender and Culture. (n.d.). <https://thewire.in/rights/caa-protest-northeast-indigenous>

northeast Indians as they believed this could further lead to illegal influx of immigrants from neighbouring countries. This could lead to the loss in the cultural and ethnic identity of the region. The **Assam Accord** which was signed between the Assamese nationalists and the Indian government was overturned with the CAA, according to which, only a person entering into the state of Assam before March 1971, could be considered as an Indian citizen.¹⁸

Due to the constant negligence of the region, hate speech from the citizens of mainland and lack of response from the Indian government, there has been a history of separatist movements from the region. These attempts for secession have been unsuccessful due to the diplomatic relations between the leaders and the centre. Most of these have also been neutralised through the intervention of the Indian army which had further agitated the people of Northeast, as seen in the case of Mizoram. There have been many rebels as well as guerrilla groups in the region which increases the violence of the region.

The mainstream media has portrayed Indians in a certain way. This includes projecting a person with a dusky to fair skin tone, a stereotypical accent and attire. This particular look of an Indian has been fed into the minds of people both in the country as well as outside. Therefore, this often leads to the confusion in the identification of a northeast Indian. The people of the northeast tend to reflect physical attributes to those of the Chinese and Mongolians, which does not allow the citizens of the mainland to identify them as Indians.

All these reasons have fuelled the tensions between the northeast and the mainland, which has led to the current predicament. The misinformation regarding the origins of pandemic, little knowledge about the northeast region of India as well as the history of tensions and conflicts has led to this false perception and hateful discrimination from the citizens of the mainland towards the citizens of Northeast.

Conclusion

Most of the people who were interviewed by the media stated that there are no strict laws regarding the racism taking place in India. Despite the existence of some laws, the people end up getting away from the legal system. Even the implementors of law, that is the police, rarely express a concern over the racism that persists over the country. Racism is not only a social problem for the Northeast but the human beings. It is important for people to understand that

¹⁸ Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration (NRC), Assam. (n.d.). https://www.nrcassam.nic.in/assam_accord.html#:~:text=The%20Assam%20Accord%20was%20signed,coming%20to%20Assam%20from%20%E2%80%9CSpecified

there are certain attributes which are natural and cannot be changed. Just because someone is looking different from themselves, does not mean that the others are any less to them in terms of equal opportunities. India's strength lies in its unity coupled with its diversity but now has become a curse. India after the independence, aimed at creating a nation that is accommodating towards all the individuals. But this accommodation is only possible with the contemplation and understanding of the Indians itself. The concept of solidarity has to be recognised by the people. There has to be acceptance in the society and the idea of chauvinism has to be eradicated. Education and awareness are essential and should be made necessary from the young age itself. It is also important to understand the history and the root cause of the problem, to analyse what was the possible reason for our failure in understanding the things to address the issue, only then we can give the actual compensation to the victims of the racism.

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