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LINDA CHHAKCHHUAK (<https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/contributer/detail/LINDA-CHHAKCHHUAK>)
| 27 MARCH, 2020

Another Pandemic: Northeasterners in India Face Racist Harassment, Assault

New form of racist name calling is a prelude to physical assaults

SHILLONG: Trapped inside by the coronavirus lockdown and hounded outside by racism, people from the small communities of India's northeastern states are facing increased instances name calling, assault and even evictions, after being identified as 'Corona' by random locals across several states in the wake of global pandemic.

How long does it take for a government to take action, inquire and act on the many cases which have been highly publicised?

The question needs answering for many peoples' lives are hanging on a thread, as surreal moments play out in an atmosphere soaked in fear, of the corona virus, its Chinese connection, the lockdown. The raging hysteria of this bizarre moment is cocktail with 'normal' racial discrimination against the mongoloid featured, coming out as frenzied indiscriminate attacks on the people of the north eastern states.

So much so that several are afraid to go out now. They are in danger of starving, hunkered down insecurely wherever they are scattered around India, where some of their fellow citizens seem to loathe them, with more and more now linking them ignorantly to 'China where the virus spread from.'

"I'm scared to even go out for groceries because the other day a man just accosted me in the market and shouted 'Corona, Corona' right at my face," said L, a youngster working in a

local company in Pune, Maharashtra. She wanted to avoid the public glare therefore the use of an initial only.

L's case is just one of many as a rudimentary survey done by phone and on social media reveals the scale of the problem.

The novel coronavirus has raised the decibels of fear and suspicion against one another, definitely. But it is the people of the tiny mongoloid tribes and communities of the northeast region of India who are facing new forms and increased instances of racist behaviour across several Indian states where they are studying, working or settled. Facing discrimination is not new but at present they are in an even more vulnerable position.

L, who hails from Mizoram, said the incident happened on March 21 when she and her colleagues were hurriedly picking up groceries late evening at Kondhwa, Shivnerinagar. "This man just looked at me and shouted like that. I was frozen scared. We were so afraid he would assault us, but luckily a person standing nearby intervened and shouted at the man who slunk off. But my heart turned to jelly. We hurriedly picked up stuff and rushed back home. We dare not go out anywhere after that," she said.

Many persons hailing from Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are working and living in the metros and states of India, and have managed to survive the travails of being a mongoloid featured Indian amidst the sharp-nosed non-mongoloid majority host population in those states.

Racist behaviour against them is nothing new.

L said the northeastern people suffer a lot of name-calling and insulting behavior even in the most peaceful times. "Now people don't hesitate to call us 'Corona' soon as they see us," she said. Cooped up under the general lockdown, they are scared to venture out for provisions.

Asked if she feels she is in physical danger, she replied "Right now I'm very unsure as I have not gone out since that day, but it feels like this could be the onset of more racist harassments."

As L surmised, what's worrying is that this new form of racist name calling is a prelude to

physical assaults, as sections of people in the host states, steeped in ignorance and superstition, are adding to misinformation about these their fellow citizens.

Her claims were seconded by Wungramthing Huileng, president of the Nagaland Students Union, Mumbai. Over WhatsApp he said that a few days back they were being followed around with calls of 'Corona, Corona'.

"If the situation gets worse we may encounter ostracism," he said. Since the lockdown, with everybody staying at home they have not heard this taunt. However, they are confident and feel secure because they have maintained "strong links with the police and local politicians who are quick to come out to support" them, he said.

Racist discrimination has however become so widespread that they need stronger solidarity and support from the home states and their home state governments, he emphasised. This is sorely missing.

Northeastern state governments remain blind even as it is becoming a major issue, with children being targeted by their tiny peers.

As early as February, a seven year old, also from Mizoram, all but born in Vellore, Tamil Nadu was the brunt of racist remarks from his mates in school who chanted 'Corona, Corona, Chinese, Chinese' at him all the time. The boy was very disturbed. He told this reporter that he tried to explain to his friends that he was Mizo, from Mizoram and not from China. But they wouldn't listen and continued to heckle him.

His parents, who had landed in Vellore in 2013 for treatment, complained to the school authorities who promised to take up the matter, but that was the last they heard of this incident. There was no action taken.

Sociologists could later on study racist trends in times of pandemic, but for now it's high time the government create a rapid action task-force to heed these fears, as the hysteria building around this could end with a heavy cost for those being racially targeted.

Of course, in the wake of several glaring incidents on the 21st of this month the union home minister sent an alert to the chief secretaries of all the states and Union Territories. The letter said that the Ministry of Home Affairs had noticed that people of the north east

have been facing harassment since the occurrence of COVID-19.

Well known athletes and sportspersons among them were harassed by being linked to COVID19. The letter asked the state authorities to take action in such cases.

But apart from this letter and tweets from some MPs like Kiren Rijiju, reports from the ground where the NE youngsters are hunkered down in fear across several states reveal that nothing has changed.

As the lockdown and curfew deepens, and the country struggles against the global pandemic, people from the north east have the added burden of keeping themselves safe from their neighbours' unpredictable racist wrath which may strike them any time.

To find out what steps were being taken by governments of the northeastern states this reporter tried to contact the authorities in some of the key states over the phone, but drew a blank, except for a response from N.Rio, chief minister in the Nagaland government, and Lok Sabha MP C.Lalrosanga.

Asked if he felt that the concerns of the people of his state and others living in other parts of India were being adequately addressed by the concerned states after the MHA dashed off its letter on March 21, CM Rio said he is very much alive to the issue, and that his government has been proactive in any cases that come to their notice.

He said that students who faced harassment in two recent cases had been brought home, while others were lodged in the care of the Nagaland House in Kolkata. "This is very serious. I have spoken about this to the BJP president [J.P.Nadda] and the union home minister, Amit Shah. They said they would take up the matter," he said.

Meanwhile, he said he would ask the chief secretary of his state to speak to the chief secretaries of all the states where people of the region were facing such harassment.

When asked why this raging issue which concerns the security of the youth working and studying outside was never taken up collectively by the governments of the northeastern states, Rio said that so far there had never been a collective approach, but felt it should be done.

“We should and we will,” he said, promising to get things rolling.

Lok Sabha MP from Mizoram Lalrosanga when asked the same questions said that the North East MPs had planned to raise this issue in Parliament but the House was abruptly adjourned due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“But we’re following up the matter with the union home minister and the respective states,” he said.

“I’m in touch with various cities where our people are stranded, facing discrimination and eviction or are being sheltered. I’m busy with that right now,” he said.

To date the governments of these states have not taken any concrete policy and operational steps to protect their citizens, barring creating some helplines, instead of a serious joint task force to deal with this swift and dangerously developing situation adding to the chaos already there.

Linda Chhakchhuak is an independent journalist

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