RE

The Dis-Ease of Body-Politics

“Coronavirus” as a Racial Pandemic in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

The biomedical crisis of COVID-19 in India has amplified several other crises, namely; social, cultural, communal, religious, geographical, economic, political, racial and gender. It is important to note that these crises are not new – they were already socio-culturally embedded and functional in the pre-COVID-19 era. With the inception of COVID-19, these crises have been further aggravated through the re-configuration and re-systematisation of various forms of social, cultural, political, economic, racial, geographical, religious and economic violence. With respect to these arguments, this commentary focuses on how the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to an alarming rise in racial hatred against the residents of Northeast India in the contemporary era. Through socio-historically analysing the problematic rise of racial hatred, the commentary also identifies the various ways through which the pandemic of COVID-19 is not only functioning as a disease, but also as a “dis-ease” of body-politics and racism.

KEYWORDS

biomedical crisis, violence, COVID-19, Dis-Ease, body-politics, racism

In the article “Covid-19 and Multiple Racist Attacks Against North-East Indians” (2020), Shatabdi Deori makes a note of the various forms of racist attacks that have been experienced by the Northeasterners in different parts of India in the year 2020. For instance, a

resident of Mizoram (a state in Northeast of India), who has been living and working in Pune (a city in the state of Maharashtra), was physically attacked in a shopping mall in the first week of March 2020 (Deori, 2020).

When the shopper was interrogated about the attack, she justified her act by saying that because the lady from Mizoram looked Chinese, she thought that she was a potential bearer of COVID-19. Besides Deori, Bismee Taskin in the article "'Corona' is not just a virus" (2020) mentions that on the Sunday night of 22 March 2020, "a man on a scootyspat pan¹ on a woman from Manipur" in the north campus area of New Delhi. After spitting pan, he called her "corona" and sped away (Taskin, 2020). On 28 March 2020, a woman from Sikkim reported to a local hospital in Kolkata with severe abdominal pains. But, instead of being treated on an emergency basis, she was forced to undergo a COVID-19 test. After being treated, when she returned home in the evening, she received a telephone call from the local police station. The police personnel asked her to immediately report back to the hospital because she needed to be isolated. In the isolation ward, the first question that the doctor asked her was, "Are you from China?" (Colney, 2020).

These experiences by the local residents of Northeast India reveal some of the forms in which the pandemic of COVID-19 has been functioning as a systemic, epistemic and ontological weapon to practise body-politics and unleash Sinophobic forms of ethnic racism in a re-configured manner. The process of racial and body-political re-configuration takes place by selectively interpreting certain human bodies as sites of "social constructions of differences [...] The body is placed in hierarchized (false) dichotomies, for example, masculine/feminine; mind/body; able-bodied/disabled; fat/skinny; heterosexual/homosexual; and young/old" (Brown and Gershon, 2017, 1). The positioning and interpretation of the bodies of the local residents of Northeast India within the hierarchised dichotomies unpack a larger issue in contemporary India, which Michel Foucault identified as the "shape of power" (1977, 57). In the article "The Eye of Power" (1977), Foucault argued that the human body plays a pivotal role in regulating the politics of power of a nation. As a result, within the communally, racially and geographically cleaved socio-political practices in contemporary India, the "cultivation of the body" (Johnson, 1989, 6) as an essential requirement cannot be denied. The racialisation and politicisation of these bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic not only shed light on their present existential crisis, but also unfurl how their bodies have been "historically disciplined" (Zerrilli, 1991, 2) since the European colonial era.

Disciplining the Body

In the article "BodyPolitics at the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic" (2020), Gediminas Lesutis observes:

In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic we can clearly see the futility of neo-liberal ideals of individuality, and understand how our subjective lives are constituted and sustained through one's exposure to the functioning of broader social systems that order possibilities of dignified life.

The neoliberal exercise of dictating possibilities of dignified life to the local residents of Northeast India has been historically underlined by the racial and body-political construct

of an ideal Indian face. Though the notion of an “ideal” Indian face is presented in a very diverse and inclusive manner, it has been observed that “Mongoloid phenotypes [...] have not found a place in common imaginaries of the ‘Indian face’” (Wouters and Subba, 2013, 130). In fact, the Northeasterners are “nonrecognized 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” (Haokip, 2020, 4). The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies these consistent practices of racism and body-politics as forms of stigmatisation in which “people negatively associate an infectious disease, such as COVID-19, with a specific population” (2020).

The physical and racial stigmatisation of the Northeasterners is so naturalised and socio-historically embedded in such a firm manner that individuals often fail to realise these as problems of body-politics and racism. Let us look into a few instances that demonstrate the various forms in which the habitual experiences of body-politics and racism by the residents of Northeast India in the pre-COVID era have contributed to its continuity during the time of COVID-19.

On 18 April 2012 a 19-year-old student from Manipur named Richard Loitam was found dead in his hostel at Acharya NRV School of Architecture, which is located in the north of Bengaluru (a city in the state of Karnataka). His friends and family members claimed that the student “was brutally assaulted by his seniors the night before he died. On the night of April 17, Richard reportedly quarreled with Vishal and Sayed, who allegedly hit the Manipur student on the face and head” (NDTV Correspondent, 2012). The police investigations revealed that the attack was provoked by a general hatred of the non-Northeasterners by Northeasterners in India. The Mongoloid facial features of the Northeasterners match less with other Indians and more with the Chinese, which motivates individuals to regard them as potential outsiders. This is why Richard Loitam was attacked and injured by Vishal and Sayed in Bengaluru. Such practice of marking, regulating, racialising and negotiating power (Sorrels, 2015, p. 52) through specific bodies happened with Dana Sangma from Meghalaya as well.

On 24 April 2013, a student named Dana Sangma from Meghalaya (a state in the Northeast of India) died by suicide in her hostel room at Amity University, Gurugram (a city in the northern Indian state of Haryana) due to “alleged ‘discrimination’ by the Amity University authorities” (NDTV Correspondent, 2013). Her friends claimed that she was found cheating in the examination hall by an invigilator and was racially abused. Unable to handle the humiliation, she committed suicide. Dana Sangma’s incident reveals the authentication, naturalisation and systematisation of the dis-ease of body-politics and Sinophobic forms of ethnic racism by the capitalistic institutions in contemporary India. Racial discrimination against the Northeasterners is not only performed physically, but also psychologically, in which certain bodies are disowned and dismantled socially, culturally, geographically, topographically and racially from the existential mainstream into dehumanised boxes of pseudo-rationality. Such dehumanised boxes of pseudo-rationality are normalised, naturalised and validated by “a system that was historically and socially constructed and that was and still is linked closely to power in today’s global context” (Sorrels, 2015, 55). The suicide of Dana Sangma unpacks a similar narrative. Sangma was not directly

killed by the institution. Instead, the institution racially dehumanised her by forcing her into boxes of pseudo-rationality. These boxes are socio-historically maintained with prejudices of body-politics and racism, which compelled her to end her life.

Nido Tania from Arunachal Pradesh (a state in the Northeast of India) was also a victim of body-politics and racism. On 28 January 2014, Nido Tania, a 20-year-old student from Arunachal Pradesh, was “beaten with rods and sticks after a fight with a shopkeeper and other men in South Delhi’s Lajpat Nagar market” (Biswas, 2014). Nido’s friends and family members alleged that the feud erupted because Nido was abused by the shopkeeper and other men for his physical appearance and blond hair. As an act of retaliation, he broke a glass counter at the shop. The police claimed that they intervened and settled the fight. But, the next day (29 January) he was found murdered at his sister’s house. Police investigations denied that the murder of Nido Tania was an act of racism and reported it as a result of personal feuds. This is why, in the book *Debating Race in Contemporary India* (2015), Duncan McDuaie-Ra argues: “A great deal of energy goes into strenuously denying that racism exists in India, or upon recognizing that it may exist, stressing that it is not as bad as in other countries.” The normalization and denial of such body-politics and racism against the Northeasterners continue to take place during COVID-19.

The practices of body-politics and racism against Northeasterners are not only limited within the parameters of physical and psychological violence, but also extend to linguistic violence. According to Peter I. De Costa, linguistic racism “refers to the ideologies and practices that are utilized to conform, normalize and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users” (2020, 834). The attack on Michael Lamjathang Haokip from Manipur for not being able to communicate in Kannada unveils the conformation, normalisation and reformulation of linguistic racism against the Northeasterners in India. On 14 October 2014 Michael Lamjathang Haokip was attacked in Bengaluru by a group of passersby for not being able to communicate in the Kannada language (the state language of Karnataka). According to Haokip:

They kept asking me to speak in Kannada. They said, “if you outsiders know how to eat food that is produced in Karnataka, you must also know to speak Kannada. This is India, this is not China.” I tried to reason with them, but they were hysterical (quoted in Mondal, 2014).

Besides linguistic racism, socio-historically, since the European colonial era, the bodies of women from Northeast India have always functioned as *easily available sites of sexual pleasure* for men from the non-Northeastern parts of India. The imagination and objectification of the bodies of women from the Northeast of India by non-Northeastern men are acts of “vigorous imaginative engagement with another person’s particularity” (Nussbaum, 2013, 165). The habitual experiences of Kim, a call centre worker from Manipur, reveal how on the basis of her dressing style, fashion sense, body language, facial and physical features and behavioural patterns her “body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire” (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2011, 8). According to Kim, who works in Gurugram:

Men in Delhi treat us as if we are loose women. Just the other day, I was standing at the pickup point for my office cab to take me to Faridabad. There was another woman next to me from northern India working for a tech company; we both were in formals. A car pulls up and asks, "Madam do you need a ride?" His look and his voice made it clear what he was looking for (quoted in Das, 2014).

She also adds:

At our workplaces, the men always invite me and other girls from northeast for any party they are having. As if we are party girls. They keep nagging us saying, "Let's go grab a beer, a drink." Why don't they ask other women and why ask only drinks and parties? Even when we say no, they don't give up (quoted in Das, 2014).

Body-politics and racism are also unleashed on Northeasterners through the act of name-calling. The act of name-calling against Northeasterners by the residents of non-Northeastern parts of India shows how "social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities" (Miles, 1989, 75). Bruce K. Thangkhal, a journalist from Manipur, because of his Mongoloid facial features, is racially constructed and socio-culturally differentiated from other Indians as an outsider. In New Delhi, he and his sister are consistently name-called as "bahadur", "China", "King-Kong", "chow-chow", "momo", etc. Bruce, who works in New Delhi, shared: "When people call me Bahadur, China, etc. I ask them politely, 'Why do you call me this? I am also an Indian.' But, in response they pull my shirt, twist my arms or grab my neck" (quoted in Das, 2014). He further adds:

A few months ago my sister and I went to Sarojini Nagar Market in Delhi. Someone called me King-Kong, Chow-chow, momo in a low tone voice but loud enough for me to hear. When I confronted they roughed me up. A crowd formed and they enjoyed the show. They pinched my cheeks. The men tried to pull my sister's hair, touched her back (quoted in Das, 2014).

Besides physical, psychological, linguistic, sexual and verbal racism, another common form of racism that Northeasterners face across India is workplace racism. Racism in work institutions reflects on a certain set of everyday racial harassments that are hardly realised and accepted by the people (Roscigno, Williams and Byron, 2012). The normalisation and acknowledgement of such racial harassments are centred on differences in salaries, responsibilities, promotion policies, peer treatment, etc. Jackson Gonmei, a student from Manipur, was a regular victim of workplace racism when he used to work in a callcentre in New Delhi. In 2014, his job contract was terminated without any prior notice, his last month's salary was not cleared and until the last day of his work he was not issued with any official employment letter or any experience certificate. He says:

I was working at a call centre in Delhi associated with a California-based company since 2012. In June, they asked me to stop coming with no notice. But till date they did not clear my last month's salary. Every time I call, they challenge me saying "try and do whatever you want" (quoted in Das, 2014).

Jackson also said: “For months I asked for an employment letter but they refused. Because we are treated as outsiders, they get away with suppressing us. I am not chasing the money; I think it’s time that I have to speak” (quoted in Das, 2014).

During the pre-COVID era these habitual body-political and racial experiences of Northeasterners have been systemically, epistemically and ontologically guarded by the invisible lexicons of body-political and racial ethics that are invested with terms like “micro-aggressions”, “micro-assaults”, “micro-insults”, “micro-invalidations”, and so forth. These terminologies are used to justify and authenticate the different forms of body-political and racial acts against Northeasterners, as insignificant and unintentional “commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities” (Sue et al., 2007, 278). It is such invisible lexicons of body-political and racial ethics that have re-systematised and re-configured the experiences of physical, psychological, epistemological and ontological racism during the time of COVID-19. This is why, as already discussed in the introduction, the body-political and racial practices against Northeasterners on the basis of their language, facial features, physical features, behavioural patterns, dressing style and fashion practices have intensified during COVID-19 in a highly normalised and systematic manner. Northeasterners, as lesser Indians, have always been victims of self-claimed all-knowing subjects (political leaders, academicians, civilians, etc.), who “map[s] the world and its problems, classif[ies] people and project[s] into what is good in them” (Mignolo, 2009, 2). These self-claimed subjects continue to re-configure and re-manufacture the patterns of racial hatred and body-politics against Northeasterners in contemporary India, through *corona-logy*:

a neo-colonial and a neo-racial civilizational project that uses the logic of a disease named COVID-19 to unpack new configurations of racialization, criminalization and victimization, who are being microscopically confined within the narrow chambers of racialization, criminalization, victimization and dehumanization (Dey, 2020, 52).

The project of corona-logy has inferiorised and displaced “every body that does not comply with the criteria of knowledge” (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006, 210), as established by the non-Northeast mainstream society of India. The habitual acts of racial and body-political displacements against Northeasterners can be understood and positioned within a wider epistemological and ontological framework, which Marko Stamenkovic identifies as the “imperialist cartography of knowledge” (2013, 1). The imperialist cartographies of knowledge function as a “blind spot upon which the modern conceptions of knowledge and law are built” (Santos, 2007, 50).

In a similar manner, the Northeast of India as an ideal social, cultural, political, racial, geographical, topographical and body-political spot of victimisation and dehumanisation emerged during the British colonial administration. Based on the request of Lieutenant Governor Sir William Grey, a British historian named Alexander Mackenzie prepared the Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal in 1869, which was completely erroneous in nature. According to the memorandum:

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, 1995, 1).

This description of Northeast India is racially erroneous and body-politically violent in several ways. Firstly, the northeastern part of India was mapped as the northeast frontier of Bengal by the British. This meant that, unlike other parts of India, it was never identified as a distinct geographical and topographical entity by the colonisers. Instead, Northeast India only denoted a boundary line. Secondly, the memorandum also describes Northeast India as a mere tract of land that embraces different hill ranges, spurs and ridges. These descriptions, as mentioned in the Memorandum, outline how the seeds of racial and body-political violence against the Northeasterners in contemporary India were sown during the British colonial era. As compared to the other parts of India, the colonial administration in Northeast India was administered in a segregated manner. During the British regime, the local indigenous communities were hardly allowed to interact with people from the other parts of the country (Samson, 2017, 25). In *India Against Itself* (1999), Sanjib Baruah argues that the British classified the entire northeastern part of India as “excluded and partially excluded areas” (24) and, with the exception of the European Christian missionaries, no other outsiders were allowed to enter the areas and interact with the local indigenous communities. In this way, these British colonial practices of racial and body-political seclusion against the Northeasterners were channelled into postcolonial India as a metaphysical process through different forms of physical and psychological violence.

According to Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni:

Even when you push back colonization as a physical process (the physical empire), colonialism as a power structure continues as a metaphysical process and as an epistemic project, because it invades the mental universe of a people, destabilizing them from what they used to know, into knowing what is brought in by colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020).

The epistemicides, culturecides and “linguicides” (Thiong’o, 1992, 71), as experienced by the Northeasterners during COVID-19 and before, not only uphold the pandemic as a disease, but also expose the varied forms of racial and bio-political dis-eases that have been socio-historically experienced by the local residents of Northeast India to date. The dis-eases are a result of the destabilised and metaphysically colonised state of contemporary India.

Counter-Resistance

Despite the efforts to racially and body-politically disenfranchise and marginalise Northeast India from the existential map of mainstream India, the Northeasterners are making consistent efforts to build collaborative and co-creative frameworks of counter-resistance through creating border epistemologies and developing heterarchical thinking. In *BlackSkin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon prays: “Oh my body, make me always a man, who questions!” (1987, 232). It is through habitual questioning that the Northeasterners are recovering, preserving and practising the diverse politics of knowledge that are ingrained in their bodies and their “local histories” (Mignolo, 2013, 132). The process of questioning has been taking

place through research writings, classroom teachings, curricular reformations, workshops, public sensitising programmes, cultural and literary festivals, and so on. Besides creating border epistemologies, heterarchical thinking also functions as a prominent tool for counter-resisting the dis-eases of body-politics and racism against the Northeasterners.

The term heterarchical thinking was first used by Kyriakos Kontopoulos in his book *The Logic of Social Structures* (1993) and, according to Ramon Grosfoguel, it “is an attempt to conceptualize social structures with a new language” (2008) that breaks away from the ethics and ideals as established by the European colonisers across the globe. In order to uproot the social, cultural, racial, economic and political autonomy of mainstream society in India, the Northeasterners, through various forms of collaborative initiatives like creative writing, graffiti painting, revival of indigenous socio-economic practices, have been conceptualising new social structures with new languages of expression, which will enable them to maintain their indigenous pluriversity and uniqueness on the one side, and will prevent them from getting socio-culturally closeted and mainstreamed on the other. Amidst the chaotic racial and body-political state of the Northeasterners during the pandemic of COVID-19, these Fanonian exercises of questioning and collective resistance continue to emerge and will continue to emerge in India through the languages of collaborations and co-creations.

NOTES

1. Spitting pan refers to the spitting of the juice that comes out while chewing betel leaves.
2. Bahadur is a common surname found amongst the people in/of Nepal. It is also a common name which is used to refer to the night guards in India. Usually, a large number of night guards who work in India are from Nepal and Northeast India. As the facial and physical features of the Nepalese match with those of the Northeasterners, therefore they are commonly identified as “Bahadurs”. Such homogenisation of identities is a normalised racial practice in contemporary India.

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