

THE STIGMA PANDEMIC- THE WAY COVID-19 STIMULATING ANTI-ASIAN RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

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Abstract

In the light of the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a lot of rising issues which are very alarming in nature. The purpose of this paper is to review the impacts of Coronavirus worldwide and the rising menace of Xenophobia and racial discrimination and stigmatization. Xenophobia and prejudice is more against the Asian communities as the coronavirus has emerged from Wuhan markets of China. This is activating anti-Asian attitudes in the mass public. Xenophobia is being expanding like the virus itself. This is a global phenomenon but there is particularly a large gush of racist incidents towards people belonging to Asian communities. The prejudice is not only limited to physical harassment, it also manifests itself in various forms including online harassment, name calling, social ostracism. Xenophobia is equally affecting the students mostly those of the Asian countries. Staying abroad for the sake of studies, they have now become the victim of continual racism. This increasing fear and prejudice which is resulting to discrimination may act as a catalyst in hampering student feelings, mostly of those who study abroad. It can affect their career development. Our home turf is no different. Racial discrimination is no less in one of the largest democracies of the world- India. The frontline healthcare workers who are working day and night risking their lives, they have also been the victims of continual discrimination. Doctors been beaten up, not allowed to enter his/her own residence by other residents of the locality; many such incidents is noticed. The paper make uses of various past incidents of Xenophobia during the outbreak of epidemic or pandemic and also refers to case-studies and relevant data on the increasing incidents. Moreover, it analyses the effectiveness of the measures taken to address the issue. The government along with other national authorities must act a great deal to prevent such behaviours.

Keywords:

COVID-19, pandemic, prejudice, harassment, racism, social isolation, xenophobia, stigmatisation, hate-speeches, health workers, discrimination, government, effective measures, recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the world in many different ways. Amongst the sea of various issues and problems, what is least talked about is the issue of racism that has inherent emotional and physical impacts. The present article essentially studies the rise and the consequences of racial discrimination all over the world. It also talks about the problem that the disapproval of one particular race prompts racial threats and hinders the cooperative and united battle against the pandemic and can be fatal as well. The rise in racism and xenophobia is as dangerous as the pandemic itself.

What began as a small symptomatic disorder of common cold in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 has now become one of the deadliest pandemics the world has seen since the 1918 flu pandemic. The novel coronavirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), has brought the most steering challenge to the large-scale economy and to solidity since the 2nd World war. Over the past few months, COVID-19 has vividly changed our living habits and standard. It has led to mass sickness and casualties as the virus has spread on a large scale since detected in December 2019 in the Wuhan city of China. Uncertainty and fear are continuously increasing. The pandemic also highlighted social inequalities in various countries mainly targeted towards low income communities and refugee countries. It has enabled the spread of intolerance and created lack of confidence at national and international levels, fear of

foreigners and more specifically xenophobia. Non-existence of explicit laws and regulations to deal with this issue has triggered its occurrence. The government is no doubt concerned with the universal health and economic implications of the pandemic, but they have overlooked to acknowledge the simultaneous spread of prejudice and xenophobia.

XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM

Racism, bigotry and xenophobia splits the world into different 'races' and proclaims the meanness of some ethnic groups and the predominance of some other. Xenophobia involves antagonism and resentment towards people of different national origin, culture, and values. Fanatism and intolerance is an attitude of rejection or contempt towards people, their dignity, and rights, because of their different opinion. Xenophobia is the fear or hatred of something which is supposed to be unfamiliar, unknown, or strange. It can also be exhibited as 'an uncritical exaltation of another culture' which is ascribed 'an unreal, stereotyped and exotic quality.'¹ A hate crime is crime motivated mainly by biasness and intolerance which is targeted towards a particular race or social group which causes a greater harm to the overall society and leads to injustice and discrimination. Xenophobia is inherently correlated with racism. Any group can be the target of racism. It is not any extra-terrestrial

¹ Xenophobia (July 24, 2020), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenophobia>

concept neither in India, nor in other countries of the world. With the advent of the pandemic, there had been a lot of rising issues all over the world. One of the most alarming issues is that it has led to the rising menace of xenophobia. The world-over spread of Xenophobia is going hand to hand with the virus itself. On one hand, due to COVID-19 surveillance, severe concern is been raised on individual privacy all over the world and on the other hand, xenophobia and racist activities are making people's lives miserable. The persons who have been the victims of racism will be more traumatised and refrain from reporting their disease in fear of the society; they will remain undetected. This will further trigger the spread of the disease.

PANDEMICS AND STIGMATIZATION

Whenever there's some kind of major crisis associated with global or regional impacts, and as soon as people are able to identify that such crisis occurred due to a specific place from where it emerged from, they get a very small excuse and start incriminating the individuals of that particular place on the basis of the appearance and race. When severe infection control procedures and restrictive practices such as quarantine and isolation, social distancing are employed to protect the public's health, the fear automatically paves its path for further growth. Different groups of people are targeted or discriminated against based on different categorizes. Research has also indicated that racism, and race and religion-related hate crime is extensively increasing. The rate at which incidents of Human Rights

violations have surged; reading such news seems to be our daily cup of tea. Discrimination and harassment of individuals from different backgrounds, national origins, or race highlights the concept of 'otherness.' The concept of 'otherness' arises especially when the viral outbreaks takes the shape of pandemic and is tedious and fatal in nature. Sickness produces fear, which in turn helps in the growth of bias within individuals.² This is not something alien that a public health crisis has resulted in the othering and disparate treatment of Asian residing abroad. But the condition has been critical and worsened with the present COVID-19 pandemic. Do research a bit on the history of various pandemics, everyone will be aware of the fact that a large-scale disease or outbreak is almost always accompanied by stigmas and prejudices against the people of certain racial group. There is always one community that bears the burden and brunt of it. A specific trend is been noticed for racism during the outbreak of various large-scale diseases. During AIDS outbreak, people made the gay community their victims; during tuberculosis, the working-class sections of the society became the prey of peoples' fear and irrationality. With coronavirus, it came out to be a racial thing, where people from China or East Asian-looking people are being discriminated against. The presence of epicentre of the virus,

² Angela R. Gover, Shannon B. Harper & Lynn Langton, SPRINGER LINK, *Anti-Asian Hate Crime During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality* (July 7, 2020) <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>

Wuhan city of China in the Asian continent is supposed to be the main cause of these anti-Asian racist activities. The political incidents are no less contributing to such issues. The use of the term 'Chinese virus' by Trump had apparently contributed to racial attacks against the Asian Americans. Stigmatization and biasness is increasing day by day. These kinds of stigmatization associated with discrimination often has social and economic complications that strengthen and exaggerate the stigmatization and mind-sets of fear.³

ANTI-ASIAN HATE CRIMES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The World Health Organization (WHO) following the nomenclature procedures, gave the name of the pandemic as COVID-19. The nomenclature procedures are strictly set up in a way that it do not violate and offend any cultural, social, national, regional, professional, or ethnic groups. Several such instances are noticed relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is fear of impartation of COVID, landlords and hotel managers at various places are forcing tenants for eviction, people been beaten up, spluttered, insulted, pelted with eggs and many others. Discrimination targeted towards Asian communities has increased. As per reports, by late April 2020, the New York City Commission

on Human Rights received nearly 250 reports of harassment and discrimination on account of coronavirus and half of such victims are of Asian descent. The prejudice is more against the Asian people as the coronavirus is supposed to have emerged from Wuhan markets of China. The violence is not only restricted towards Chinese people, several Asian Communities are also becoming victims of xenophobia and racism. This in turn is causing to activate anti-Asian attitudes in the mass public. Although the COVID-19 has been a global phenomenon, there has been a particularly large surge of racist incidents and discriminatory activities towards Asian community. The prejudice is not only limited to physical harassment, it also manifests itself in various forms including online harassment, name calling, social ostracism.

Many a times, the symptoms of coronavirus are not noticeable. The people being positive of coronavirus are unnecessarily blamed and also been stigmatized for not following quarantine norms. A Chinese group of people in UK received a Facebook post reading 'the disgusting, barbaric animal cruelty, you people do- you all deserve to get the virus.'⁴ In Australia, similar incidents has been noticed. Some Asians were spat-on, physically assaulted, many were refused access to

³ Barry Johnson, *Agency for toxic substances and disease registry- A primer on health risk communications principles and practices*, ATSDR (December 1994), <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/risk/riskprimer/index.html>

⁴ Dan Whitehead, *You deserve the coronavirus: Chinese people in UK abused over outbreak*, SKY NEWS (February 12, 2020), <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-chinese-people-face-abuse-in-the-street-over-outbreak-11931779>

business and transportation. Indicating the Asian Community, a spray-painted picture in the US read as 'Go home, yellow dogs.' Online harassments are noticed frequently in the form of derogatory and racist epitaphs, verbal abuse, threats and what not. Residential and business houses are being vandalised and violent public attacks are noticed. In Bolivia, the government forcefully mandated three Japanese tourists to vacate though they neither been to any virus epicentre nor showed any symptoms of the disease. Xenophobia is equally affecting the students studying abroad belonging to the Asian countries. This increasing fear and prejudice which is resulting to discrimination may act as a catalyst in hampering student feelings, mostly of those who study abroad. It can affect their career development.

THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE- The Plight of the North-Easterns

Our home turf is no different. Racial discrimination is no less in one of the largest democracies of the world- India. It is well known that Indians rely on numerous religious and superstitious beliefs. These beliefs gradually gives rise to prejudice and stigmatization. Pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, several such hateful incidents are being noticed all over India. The pre-existing ingrained prejudice against various communities are re-emerging, especially against the inhabitants of the north-east. Everywhere, cases have been coming up, where people have been beaten up, spat on, insulted, or just called by the name 'corona' which has

very weirdly emerged as a racial disgrace and smear. Every year, thousands of young people from the Northeast migrate to other cities in search of jobs and for other educational purposes. But most of them are treated badly pertaining to their looks and appearance. North eastern people are harassed by names 'Hakka noodles', 'chowmein' etc. A Manipuri woman in Delhi being racially abused at marketplace, she was called 'Gandi virus' by a group of men. In another incident, two shopkeepers in Hyderabad were denied entry at a supermarket because they looked like foreigners. The two were denied entry even after showing a government-issued identity cards proving that they were Indians.⁵ Needless to mention that the students are the worst sufferers. The students of north-eastern origin studying in other parts of India are mis-referred as Chinese people and they are targeted. A wave of bigotry has engulfed some Indians who think these people are Chinese. This destroys the motivation of the students and they go through severe mental and physical trauma, which affect their educational life harshly. Suicides done by students have become the most common and noticeable incidents nowadays. A student from Assam, reported to a news channel that many called her 'coronavirus' and people tell her that the virus came from China to India through the Northeast. This is quite sad and unreasonable at the same time.⁶ In one

⁵ 'COVID-19 pandemic and racism in the United States and India' *Economic and political WEEKLY*, June 6, 2020

⁶ Aamir Altaf, *You are Coronavirus: Students from North East India Face Bigotry Over Pandemic*, LIVEWIRE (March 18, 2020),

tragic case, a young man from Meghalaya working at a food court in Agra committed suicide after posting on social media that he had been fired, had nowhere to go and saw no hope.⁷ In another similar incident, two north eastern female students studying in Delhi University were attacked by some men on motorbikes who threw water balloons at them and criticized them badly. In some cases, people have gone so far as to make official complaints against north easterns. Delhi has become a hub for violence against north-eastern people, the most notable instance, Nido Tania incident.⁸ The condition is really pathetic and getting worse day by day. Even the healthcare workers who are giving their best in the pandemic, they are also being harassed and discriminated. These must come to an end.

SOME INCIDENTS I PERSONALLY GOT TO KNOW

Even the healthcare workers who are giving their best in the pandemic, they are also being harassed and discriminated. People remember them only in times of needs and ignore in other times. The ignorance at times take the

<https://livewire.thewire.in/campus/you-are-coronavirus-students-from-northeast-india-face-bigotry-over-pandemic/>

⁷ Kimi Colney, *Indians from the northeast face intensified racism as coronavirus fears grow*, THE CARAVAN (April 3, 2020),

<https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/coronavirus-increases-racism-against-indians-from-northeast>

⁸ Tanima Biswas, *Daylight attack with iron rods killed college student Nido Tania*, NDTV (February 10, 2014), <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/daylight-attack-with-iron-rods-killed-college-student-nido-tania-550373>

form of prejudice and bigotry. Some of such incidents I will be putting forth which I personally got to know. Amidst the pandemic, these incidents come to my ear in a very frequent manner as my mother herself is a nursing staff. Some of her friends have also been victims of such racial attacks and harassments. In late July 2020, a nursing staff became the victim of a shocking incident. She was tested positive of COVID-19 and later after 3-4 weeks got cured. She attended a small wedding party of her relative. Seeing her, all other neighbours who attended the wedding, left the place, and boycotted the wedding. They alleged that she is a nursing staff and has come to the wedding only to spread the virus. This is a very embarrassing and shameful incident. In another bizarre incident reported in Kolkata (West Bengal), a doctor after duty hours beaten up by local people in his locality. Those inhumane people claimed that he, being a doctor cannot enter the locality. He was prohibited from entering his own apartment. Such kinds of brutality and boycotts are noticed in every sector of the economy. These kinds of people have ingrained within their mind that healthcare workers are the only carriers of corona and thus they must be prohibited from every places. After all these merciless and atrocious behaviour, they claim themselves as educated!

A lot of COVID care network have been set up to prevent these incidents, but then comes the question, how are they supposed to work if the work environment itself is cruel enough?

FIGHTING RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

‘Racism is not stupidity, racism is hate. Racists constantly find excuses to expound their hatred and in this current backdrop of the coronavirus, they've found yet another excuse.’⁹ The situation is heading towards a greater stigmatization, which indeed needs to be controlled before taking the form of yet another ‘pandemic of racism.’ Racism is an issue we must all address. After all it’s a human rights issue, and individuals must be aware of their dignity and rights. Racist, xenophobic, and intolerant attitudes harm people’s dignity. The government is to some extent also responsible for this situation. In their speeches, openly criticising some communities is triggering hatred towards them. This situation must be brought under control. Racial discriminations and xenophobic incidents come under the ambit of human rights violation. Though there are various national and international conventions and declarations to fight against such human rights violation cases, no exclusive law exists in the world which has provisions of punishment for the wrongdoers.

INDIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Article 14 and 15 of the Constitution of India states about equal treatment to everyone irrespective of their gender, caste, race. Besides, Article 21 guarantees the protection

⁹ Sarah Ferguson, *5 ways to fight racism and xenophobia*, UNICEF USA (March 11, 2020), <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/5-ways-fight-racism-and-xenophobia/34567>

of life and personal liberty to every individual and states that, "No person shall be deprived of his life and personal liberty except according to procedure established by law. There are laws like Section 153A¹⁰ and Section 509 of IPC¹¹ but these do not effectively cover these types of instances. However, Section 153C and 509A of IPC penalizes the use of criminal force and word, gesture or act intended to insult any particular race group, respectively. In 2014, the Supreme Court had issued guidelines against the discrimination faced by North-eastern citizens. SC/ST north-eastern citizens can seek protection under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. But not everyone falls under this SC/ST category and they are not focused by any legislation. Likewise, terms such as chinkies, Hakka noodles used in a defamatory manner are not defined as offence under the same act. Over and above, there is no explicit piece of legislation to deal with social ostracism and racial discrimination. Police are not even aware of the sections under which they can charge the person making racist comments. In the case of a woman, they file a complaint under Section 354 or 509 of IPC. Though, they have no idea if it involves man as a victim. Males also face discrimination because of their mongoloid features but there is no specific law.

Governments, media, and communities have an important role to play in preventing and

¹⁰ Indian Penal Code 1860. s. 153A

¹¹ Indian Penal Code 1860. s. 509

stopping stigma in general. But we all need to do our part, showing supportive behaviours and stand by the victims and address the issue. Racism is so deep rooted that sometimes we unknowingly say something which when interpreted can be treated as a racist comment. So, racism should be destroyed from the roots. For that it is necessary that the society must know what racism is and which comment knowingly or unknowingly amounts to racism. Strict laws must be implemented for crimes related to racism.

I personally conducted a small survey about the individual understanding about xenophobia and racism, and what I found in the result was shocking. It was a simple google form where in a total of 20 responses, I received 12 responses where the persons mentioned that they are unaware of xenophobia and its increasing implications worldwide. I was really taken aback. The deduction which I arrived at is the public require general consciousness of such human rights violation which is only possible through various awareness programmes. India, a country where such human rights violations are least talked about undoubtedly needs immediate protective measures and strict laws to deal with. Racism can be fought under the ambit of right to equality. Laws should be made more specific much like those of SC/ST.

INTERNATIONAL SCENARIO AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The prohibition of racial discrimination is enshrined in all core international human

rights instruments, placing obligations on States, and tasking them with eradicating discrimination in the public and private spheres. Every country should develop and implement various National action plans. Some of the most prominent international human rights instruments are-

1. INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

This was the first Human Rights treaty of the United Nations adopted in the year 1966 and it subsequently came into force in 1969. It contains several important provisions and its main motto is to work for elimination of racial discrimination and preventing hate speeches. Some of the core provisions contains about prevention of discrimination, prohibition of incitement, promotion of tolerance, dispute resolution mechanisms and individual complaints mechanism. The main work is to guarantee the right of everyone without any distinction.

2. EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS (ECHR)

ECHR, a human rights treaty between 47 states of the Council of Europe was drafted in the year 1950 and came into force on 1953. This convention also provides for various important provisions to fight against racial discrimination and other human rights violations. Some of the notable provisions are Right to life (Article 2), Freedom from torture (Article 3), Freedom from slavery (Article 4), Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion

(Article 9). All activities under this convention are regulated by the European court of Human Rights.

3. BILL OF RIGHTS

Bill of Rights is basically the first ten amendments of the United States Constitution. It ensures civil rights and liberties to the individual like freedom of speech, press, and religion. It sets rules for due process of law and reserves all powers not delegated to the Federal Government to the people or the States. The 10 amendments clearly states the rights and freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly, and other human rights.

Besides these conventions, there exists many international declarations which were formed only for the protection of human rights. Some of the declarations are as follows-

1. DECLARATION ON RACE AND RACIAL PREJUDICE

This declaration consists of 10 Articles which lay the details on equal rights of every individual and prevention of racial discrimination.

2. DECLARATION ON ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

This declaration states that all States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental free-

doms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.

3. DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public. Such rights of individuals has been inferred in this declaration.

Furthermore, there are both treaty based, and charter based Human Rights bodies under the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that works to offer the best expertise and support to the different human rights and also works a great deal on monitoring different mechanisms.

Racism and xenophobia is a great Human Rights issue that can be regulated with the help of the stated international conventions and declarations. But there is a need of an explicit and stringent legislation in each and every countries of the world to battle the menace of racism. The NGOs prove to be of much help in such cases. They must come forward and help the victims in whichever way possible. Awareness programmes should be organised in schools and other institutions. Government should undertake campaigns and educational trainings Individual contributions are also necessary. People must be aware of the possibilities and consequences and the means to

fight those. Unless we are cautious, no regulations is going to aid us. So, we need to be responsive enough, otherwise the racially prejudiced people will get yet another excuse to continue with the disaster of bigotry and narrow-mindedness.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has widely affected and still affecting the society, culture, diversity and has inculcated a constant fear amongst all the individuals. There have been cases of racism all over the world for quite a long time and the outbreak of coronavirus has reawakened it. The spread of the virus led to the stigmatisation of a certain minority group of people because of the origin of the virus. The law enforcement authorities of all the countries had taken certain measures to deal with the surge of racism. They are accepting a complaint and making an arrest. But the continued incidents of xenophobia and racism proves that such steps were not enough to stop racial attacks. It was evident that more forceful and wide-ranging steps are necessary to address the larger issue of racism. If strong measures are not implemented, the virus of racism will inherently remain in the mindsets of people, which can be a threat to peace and solidarity of the society and the community at large.

Political Leaders and higher authorities should be more sensitive with the kinds of language they use when it comes to matters that can hurt the sentiments of people, especially in diverse and democratic societies like the US and India.

The individuals- whether they are leaders or general public who defame people of a certain race should realise that viruses such as COVID-19 do not have race or nationality.

COVID-19 is itself a pandemic, and if this stigmatization and racial discrimination keeps on surging on a regular basis, it may take the form of a pandemic one day. Racial attacks can be equally deadly and dangerous to humanity as much as the virus itself. In a globalised world, it needs the cooperation and collective efforts of individuals, society groups, governments, and international institutions to fight against all kinds of pandemic. The present coronavirus is no exception.