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7-MIN READ

'He Spat and Called Me Corona': Racism Against North East Indians Feeds Off Coronavirus Panic



People from the northeast have come under repeated racial attacks since the coronavirus outbreak in India | Image credit: Twitter

New Delhi: It was at 9 pm after observing the Janata Curfew called by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to curb the coronavirus pandemic when Rameshwori, 25, stepped out of her house in North Delhi's Vijaynagar to get some groceries. Fearing imminent lockdown, she and two of her friends had decided to stock up on some essentials for the coming week. Little did she know that the short, everyday trip would become one of the most traumatic ones of her life.

"He was on a white Scooty and probably chewing paan. As he whizzed past me, he spat the paan on my face and shouted "corona", Rameshwori recalled.

An MPhil student of Delhi University's Department of English, Rameshwori had been living in Delhi for over seven years and had never experienced anything like it before. "It was quite a deliberate attack. He slowed down near me, spat at my face, called me corona and left. I was too shocked to react," she said.

After the incident, Rameshwori called Delhi Police's northeast helpline and filed a complaint that very night. It took her four hours to convince the cops that she had been attacked. An FIR was registered under Section 509 of the IPC that punishes acts aimed at harming the modesty of a woman. "But he didn't just spit on me because I'm a woman. I was attacked because I'm a north-eastern woman from Manipur with Mongoloid features," she said.

A virus far more menacing

Ever since COVID-19 broke out of China's Wuhan and spread across the world at stunning speed, Asians, especially people with distinct Mongoloid features, have come under repeated racially driven attacks. While Asians across the world faced the brunt of it, people from the northeast have come under repeated racial attacks since the coronavirus outbreak in India | Image credit: Twitter

While Asians living across the world faced the brunt of racism in the wake of the COV-19 outbreak, people from the northeastern states of India were not spared even at home.

Rakhi Bose

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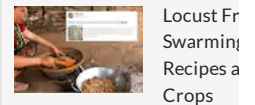


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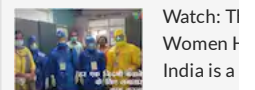
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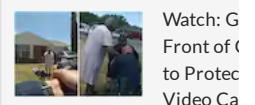
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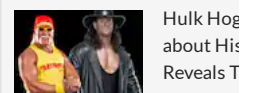
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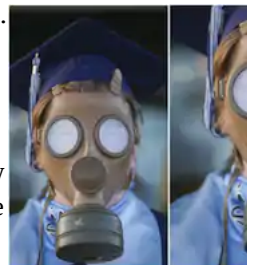


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Student Dons Gas Mask For



On Friday, Anna* from Manipur was on her way to Sarojini Nagar in Delhi market with her friends to return some items. She was called "*gandi virus*" (dirty virus) by a group of men passing her. Speaking to News18, her sister Linda* said that such comments were not at all unusual post the coronavirus outbreak. "When we try to take autos, the drivers ask us whether we are from China and if we have the virus. We have to convince them that we are Indians to be allowed to ride," Linda, who works as a nurse at a local hospital, said.

With an increasing number of racist attacks on people from the northeast, many find traveling in public transport a challenge. Last week, Rachungailiu Gonmei, a Masters' student at Hans Raj College, was on her way back home after filing for her examination form when she took a shared e-rickshaw as she had done for years. But this time, no one wanted to get inside the e-rickshaw, which is usually shared by at least seven people including the driver. Gonmei claimed that people covered their mouths and sat on the next rickshaw. After 15-20 minutes, the student of literature had to book the entire rickshaw privately for herself to get the driver to move. "It may be indirect or subtle but it still counts as racism," she said.

Gonmei noted that it wasn't just strangers who turned hostile but also people whom she had known for years including friends. "I definitely have felt changes. It's always been difficult dealing with racism but with the virus outbreak, people have been more insensitive and ignorant," she added.

"Just an excuse"

According to Mercy Thiemneihai, who works as a manager at a medical clinic in Mumbai and has lived in the city for seven years, the virus has just given Indians an excuse to express their latent racism. Mercy was pushed by two boys who pointed at her and called her corona while she was on her way to Oshiwara Market. Mercy narrated how her 22-year-old sister who had just moved to Mumbai from Manipur had been heckled by a group of children in her housing complex. They pointed at her and called her "Chinese virus" and "corona" while they laughed.

"Children are supposed to be innocent. But my sister saw hate in their eyes. It's hard to imagine what their parents must be like and what they must be saying about people from the northeast at home," Marcy added.

Physical and verbal racism aside, coronavirus has also brought a spike in online racism. Activist and former General Secretary of the National Students Union of India was told to go to Wuhan on social media on Janata Curfew Day.



She was also abused after she criticized the government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak. Aribam, who filed a complaint with Delhi Police's Cyber Cell, said that the hate was neither new and indeed was quite institutionalized. "Remember when Kiran Bedi tweeted that racist image of Chinese people in a cage?" she asked.



"When images like these are normalized and the virus is termed as Chinese virus instead of its WHO given name, communities who have always been targeted as Chinese are at the receiving end of such racism," she said.

No laws against racism

Ever since the murder of Nido Tania, a student from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi's Lajpat Nagar where he was beaten to death by seven men in 2014, the safety of the people from the northeast has been a burning issue. At the time, the killing made news and led to several protests. But Aribam felt that tackling racism needed more than just political gesturing.

Many who spoke to News18 to report incidents of harassment claimed that they wished there was a specific law for racism that they could report such instances to. As in the case of Rameshwori, many of these instances of racism failed to get noted as such due to the lack of specific laws. Tania's killing in 2014 had led to widespread demand for anti-racial discrimination law. "While the current Indian Penal Code has provisions for crimes committed against an SC /ST individual, no safeguard is in place for OBCs or those not bracketed under similar categories," Aribam told News18.

After the murder of Tania, a committee was formed to look into the atrocities and discrimination of people from the northeast face. "We are still waiting for recommendations of the Bezbaruah Committee to be implemented," Aribam said, blaming a lack of political will for the apathy.



Alana Golmei, who is the founder of the North East Support Centre & Helpline, recently wrote an open letter to the General Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs' Northeast Division about the growing instances of racism in the wake of coronavirus. "I was myself called a coronavirus by a staff member at the NCERT office in Delhi last month," she said.

Golmei, who is a member of the Monitoring Committee set up in 2008 by the MHA to look into cases of racial discrimination and abuse, felt that such incidents needed to be condemned with a strict institutional response.

These are students living away from home. The government, Golmei felt, needed to be all the more cautious to their needs and grievances.

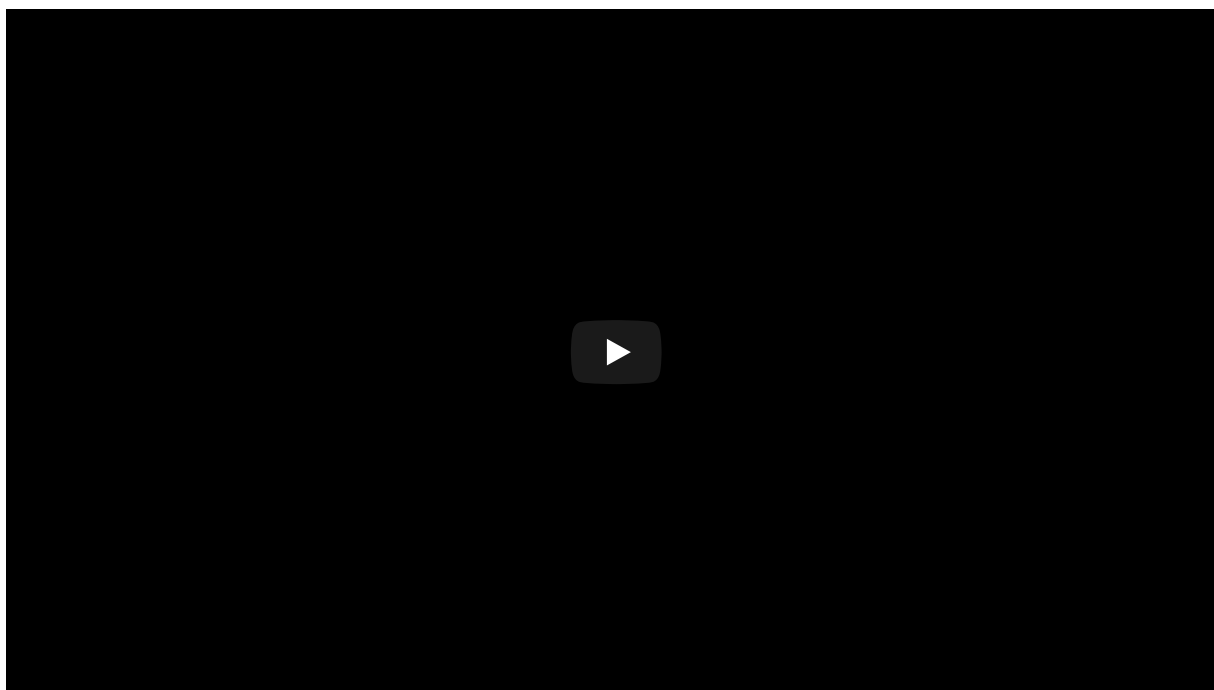
"When youth get attacked in outside states, they go back home with bad memories. It impacts their mental health and may end up adding to already existing political tension in their home states," Golmei noted, adding that politicians needed to understand the impact such incidents had on the ideal of a unified nation.

Following the attack on Rameshwori in Vijaynagar, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal took to Twitter to condemn the incident. "Am shocked to read this. Delhi Police must find the culprit and take strict action. We need to be united as a nation, especially in our fight against Covid-19," he tweeted.

Meanwhile, back at her home in Vijaynagar, Rameshwori can't help but worry about her health. "The dirty paan spit went right into my eye. I washed my eyes as soon as I could, but what if that man had coronavirus? Doesn't the virus spread through the eye?"

Rameshwori has so far been unable to get herself tested, leaving her uncertain and feeling unsafe. As she put it, COVID-19 wasn't the only virulent virus that worried her.

**Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the victims upon their request.*



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