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When racism is 'normal fun'

A support centre for people from North-East, run by a gritty team of two, records the everyday horror of racism on our streets

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A protest march against Nido Taniam's killing. Photo: Altaf Qadri/AP Photo

There is an image that never leaves Alana Golmei. A young girl is lying on her side, in a T-shirt with the face of a large, smiling, cartoon cat, and red shorts, holding a mobile phone in one hand, on a bed covered with a white sheet. You would think the girl was asleep, peacefully, in her room, if not for the gaping hole where her nose should have been, and the pool of blood under her head. Golmei sometimes wakes up to this image, sometimes she goes to sleep with it. The girl's name is Reingamphi Awungshi. She was

found dead in her rented flat in a south Delhi neighbourhood on 29 May last year. She was 21, from Manipur.

It has been less than a year since her death, and it would have been forgotten, the case closed, if it wasn't for Golmei, 38. An activist and founder-member of Burma Centre Delhi, Golmei runs the North East Support Centre and Helpline (NESCH), the only one of its kind in Delhi. Golmei received a call from Reingamphi's cousin, who also lives in the Capital, the day her body was found. The police were refusing to file a first information report (FIR). The same night, even before the post-mortem was completed, the police announced that it was a suicide, and the injuries to her face, legs, and feet were caused by rats after her death. The next day, after the post-mortem, Golmei says, the police told Reingamphi's relatives and friends to take her body from the mortuary, and that the case was closed.



Alana Golmei of the NESCH. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

"We refused," says Golmei, "We sat outside the police station, sent SMSes to everyone we knew, put it on facebook, met the local MLA—we had only one demand—file an FIR, investigate, tell us the cause of death."

This is how NESCH operates—two people, two phones, two computers, and a whole lot of grit (and often a couple of volunteers). Between Golmei and Bruce Thangkhal, a 28-year-old writer for a Manipur-based magazine, they handle 15-20 distress calls a month, often reaching the scene immediately, liaising with the police, lawyers, activists, student groups, and local politicians.

"Every call we receive is a case of racial discrimination," says Thangkhal. "You want to talk about racism? It happens to every one of us every day."

The NESCH was founded by Golmei in 2007, along with Supreme Court lawyer Lansinglu Rongmei, Madhu Chandra, the national secretary of All India Confederation of SC/ST Organizations, and John Dayal, member of the National Integration Council, after it became clear to Golmei, through personal experience, that there was rampant racial discrimination against North-Eastern people in Delhi, and that almost all of it is suffered silently for fear of more brutal attacks.

“At first I thought that there was no awareness about racism, that people did not understand the concept,” Golmei says. “But then I found out that if they thought I am from Korea, or Hong Kong, or China, I would get great behaviour, but when they came to know I’m from Manipur, it would change.”

Thangkhal too came on board the NESCH after a series of horrific experiences. He came to Delhi to work in a BPO in 2006, and one night, while returning to his home in Gurgaon after dinner at a friend’s place, he was robbed by the auto driver. Stranded miles from his home, he started walking, and after an hour, he was stopped by a police van and searched.

“The cops then told me to get into the van, and they drove off with me and started harassing me,” Thangkhal says. “They called me *chinki*, *bahadur*, they said I was a drug dealer, a pimp, then they dropped me off back at the place where I had started walking from, and I had to cover that distance all over again.” Then he was stopped again at the Gurgaon-Delhi border, and made to go through the same ordeal. “And I was thinking, I am so close to home God, please let me reach home tonight, just let me go home.”

He used to fight these racial slurs before, Thangkhal says, and then he realized, that if he carried on confronting people for harassing him, he might end up dead one day. So he chose to join NESCH and help others.



Jeremiah Pame at a meeting to discuss racial discrimination. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Jeremiah Pame, 33, is an assistant professor of English at the University of Delhi. On Wednesday, he was at a meeting of students and teachers from the North-East, to discuss how racism can be tackled in the wake of the Nido Taniam killing. Taniam, 19, of Arunachal Pradesh, died after being beaten up in Delhi’s Lajpat Nagar.

“You want to talk about racism? he says. “Then first we have to accept racism exists in India, and only then can we do something. We think racism is only in Australia or

England or the US when an Indian is attacked there. Over here, it is normal, accepted, just some fun, '*yeh toh chalta hain*'."

Some things Pame has heard almost every day of the 10 years that he has been in Delhi: "*Chinki*", "hello momo", "Chinaman chowmein *banao*", "do you eat snake?" "Do you eat dogs?" "Go back to Nepal"; "You have so much violence in the North-East, you are used to killing, why you talk so soft?"

"At first, I would go to complain to the authorities, and they said, 'where's the evidence?'," Pame says. "Unless you are beaten up, or killed, there's no evidence."

"It is really sad that Nido had to die to bring to light something that happens every day to people from the North-East," Golmei says. But now she has hope that she can reopen multiple cases that had come to her but were closed without resolution. The first priority, for which work has already started, is the 2009 rape and murder of a seven-year-old girl from Nagaland. Her body was found in the neighbour's water tank in Mahipalpur, Delhi. The suspect, who had a criminal record, including a previous charge of raping an 11-year-old girl, absconded, and the case was closed for lack of evidence.

Even after Nido Taniam's killing sparked off widespread protests in Delhi against racial discrimination, Golmei and Thangkhal continue to receive distress calls: On 7 February, a minor girl from Manipur was allegedly raped by her landlord's son in Munirka, a south Delhi neighbourhood heavily populated by people from the North-East; two days later, two young men from Manipur confronted a group of men for racial slurs, and were beaten up.

"When we reach these places, we are scared that the crowds will turn on us as well," Thangkhal says. "We have to tell them we are here to help, not to fight."

As for Reingamphi, the protesters didn't budge until the case was transferred to the crime branch, and on 3 June, an FIR was finally registered for murder. The Human Rights Law Network is fighting the case for free. The latest test reports conclude that no drugs or poison were found in her body, and that there was semen on her clothes, though the cause of death is still not clear.

"The court has ordered a DNA test to see if the semen matches that of Reingamphi's landlord and his brother-in-law, both of whom had access to her house from a back door which was found open when her body was discovered," says Amiy Shukla, the lawyer handling the case.

"Reingamphi's image does not haunt me now," Golmei says, "it only makes me feel more determined that she gets justice."

Reach NESCH at Nehelpline.net or 8860956209/8586914833.

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