



## **‘Corona-logy’: A Re-Configuration of Racial Dynamics in Contemporary India**

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### **Abstract**

*Usually, the practice of racism is interpreted within the genetic and biological frameworks of skin color. But, it is also underpinned with various other parameters: religion, geography, class, gender, etc. These underlying parameters have been faking its own insignificance and disappearance (Santos, 2020) in such a systemic fashion till date that it successfully continues to operate in a naturalized and multiplicative manner in the contemporary era. For instance, let us look into the recent incidents of communal (stigmatization of the Nizamuddin Markaz gathering), geographical (physical and verbal attacks on the local natives of Northeast India), class (chemical cleansing of the migrant workers) and gender (exclusion of the transgender community in relief packages) racisms that India have been experiencing amidst the Covid-19 crisis. These forms of racism, as mentioned above, are not new. But, through Covid-19 it seems to have gained further momentum. With respect to these aspects, this paper addresses the various ways through which Covid-19 is being used as a weapon to re-justify and re-configure the racial dynamics in contemporary India.*

**Keywords:** *Racism, Corona-logy, Multiplicative, Re-configure, Racial Dynamics.*

### **Introduction**

“I was called Coronavirus in NCERT Campus, my niece was called Coronavirus in DU Campus...” (Alana Golmei quoted in Gupta, 2020).

Alana Golmei, who is based in New Delhi and works as a Lawyer and a Human Rights Activist, hails from Manipur. Apart from her experiences, she also shares the racialized experiences of her niece, who is pursuing Masters in Delhi University. According to her niece: “Today no one wanted to sit with me in e-rickshaw ... People saw me and they didn’t get on the e-rickshaw but instead took another one. Waited for 10-15 minutes but no

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one got in. One old lady was going to get in but she saw me and she hopped into the next one ... Funny thing was the other e-rickshaws were filling up with people except the one I was in” (quoted in Gupta, 2020). With the increasing threat of Covid-19, these “callous and conspicuous negations of human equality” (Ahmad, 2017, p. 1) are gradually getting re-configured and re-justified in different parts of India. Thokchom Singhajit, the general secretary of Manipur Students Association argues: “My colleague was recently attacked and verbally abused outside Delhi. We have always faced racism in the past but this time it was taken to a new level” (quoted in Krishnan, 2020). A student from Manipur named Ripon Shanglai complains: “I was not allowed to enter a grocery store during the lockdown. The owner turned me and my friends away” (quoted in Krishnan, 2020). Cathy Akhropele, who hails from Nagaland and lives in Ahmedabad (the capital of Gujarat), has to undergo severe trauma as she was forcefully admitted to a hospital for medical checkup. The only reason behind it was that an “anonymous complainant called the police, following which a cop showed up ... with an ambulance in tow” (Dasgupta, 2020). Meiyang Chang, an Indian musician of Chinese descent, shares: “I go for a jog every day near my house in Mumbai. The other day, two guys sped past me on a bike, screaming ‘corona’ and laughing ... Over the years, I have become used to these comments and yes, they are hurtful” (quoted in [TIMESOFINDIA.COM](https://www.timesofindia.com), 2020). Nurses in Assam are being “verbally harassed and called coronavirus by people on the streets” (Saikia, 2020). These instances reveal that how the practice of racism on the basis of “color line” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 71), as introduced by the projects of European colonization, have culminated into “epistemic line” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 17). The epistemic line of racism is sustained by the phenomenon of “abyssal thinking” (Santos, 2007), which upholds the colonially patterned knowledge systems within the postcolonial socio-political spaces and dehumanizes certain sections of the society in the process. These consistent practices of systemic and epistemic dehumanization also leads to hyperincarceration. Dominique Moran and Anna Schliehe in “Introduction: Co-production and Carceral Spatiality” observes “the space of the metropolitan centre, and the ways in which the spaces of prison open into these urban spaces of marginality in the context of hyperincarceration” (2017, p. 5). India is undergoing similar experiences of criminalization, victimization, marginalization and racial imprisonment. Apart from the racially motivated physical and verbal attacks on the local natives of Northeast India, the Muslims, the transgenders and the migrant laborers are being subjected to severe forms of racial discriminations through the pandemic of Covid-19, which has been used as a “logic of racism” (Roth, 2005, p. 255) by the individuals as well as the socio-political institutions.

Keeping these arguments at the backdrop, the paper is divided into four sections. The first section, “Introduction”, sets the tone of the paper by bringing out the various experiential narratives of physical and verbal racism that are being experienced by the local natives of Northeast India in different parts of the country today. The second section, “Re-Systemizing Racism during Covid-19”, takes the argument ahead by reflecting upon how the society, the media and the governing institutions are systematically targeting the Muslims, migrant workers and the transgender community, and collaboratively working towards reshaping the already existing racial dynamics in contemporary India. The racial dynamics are being reshaped by using Covid-19 as an invisible weapon of racial violence (Petu, 2017). The third

section, “‘Corona-logy’: Re-Configuring a Neo-Racial Order”, theoretically outlines the different frames through which the biomedical crisis of Covid-19 in India has opened up new gateways for “multiple forms of social, cultural, racial and communal pandemics in the near future” (Dey, 2020). The final section, “Conclusion”, summarizes the arguments and the findings of this paper.

### **Re-Systemizing Racism during Covid-19**

Partha Chatterjee in “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35” (1982) philosophizes that “religion provides an ontology, an epistemology, as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics” (85). With the advent of Covid-19 the ontological, epistemological and the political ethics of racism have received a new impetus. In order to validate this argument, let us analyze how the Tablighi Jamaat congregation at Nizamuddin Markaz in New Delhi has been racially stigmatized. The Tablighi Jamaat is a “Muslim missionary movement” (Bisht, Naqvi, 2020), which organized a religious gathering in its headquarters at Nizamuddin Markaz in New Delhi. It is estimated that “more than 6000 people” attended the gathering (BS Web Team, 2020) between 13 and 15 March, 2020. As per the newspaper reports, though the Chief Minister of New Delhi strictly ordered to avoid all forms of social, cultural and religious gatherings on 16<sup>th</sup> March, yet “people at the Nizamuddin Markaz still continued to stay put” (Haider, 2020). As a result, it has been found that several individuals, who have attended the event from different parts of the country, have tested positive. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March, several residents of the Nizamuddin area were evacuated. After the Prime Minister of India announced a three-week nationwide lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March, the police authorities at Nizamuddin asked the remaining residents to vacate the area. At the outset, the order for vacating the locality appears to be a logical step, but as one looks into the chronology of the events one can easily understand that the exercise of vacating was clearly underlined with the intentions of re-authenticating Islamophobia and racially demeaning the Muslims. But, what is the connection between Tablighi Jamaat congregation, Islamophobia and racism?

According to Ramon Grosfoguel and Eric Mielants, “Islamophobia would be the subalternization and inferiorization of Islam produced by the Christian-centric religious hierarchy of the world system since the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century” (2006, p. 2). Muslims were always designated as ‘others’ by the European colonizers and were globally constructed as “people without religion” (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, p. 54). This epistemically and ontologically designed religious difference that was created by the European colonizers is characterized as “imperial difference” by Walter Mignolo (2000, p. 75). These processes of ‘otherizing’ the Muslims continue to take place in a neocolonial manner in contemporary India through the domination of Hinducentrism, which consistently manufactures a “disruptive, decivilising, dehumanising, exploitative, racist, violent, brutal, covetous and thingifying system” (Cesaire, 2000, p. 38) of knowledge assertion. In a similar way, the Tablighi Jamaat gathering has also been connoted in an Islamophobic and racial manner. Doubtlessly, any form of public gatherings, during this severe pandemic is highly condemnable, but it is important to reflect upon the communally-coated ways through which the news about the gathering was publicized by the media houses in India. Most of the media

houses described the gathering as “Markaz Mayhem” (Beg, 2020) and presented the news in such a manner as if before the Jamaat congregation there were no issues of Coronavirus in India. The Muslims have been abused as “Tablighi Virus” and “Corona Jihad” (Perrigo, 2020) on the one side and fake videos have been created to falsely defame them on the other.

A video from Madhya Pradesh shows that a Muslim fruit-seller, who has recently returned from the Jamaat congregation, is “licking his fingertips and touching fruits with it” (Bose, 2020). But, later on it was found that the video was shot back in February 2020 and “the man in the video was allegedly mentally unstable and had been caught on tape counting the fruits, not licking them” (Bose, 2020). The police also confirmed that there is no fear of spreading Coronavirus from him. In another video it is shown that the Muslim youths are licking utensils to deliberately spread Coronavirus. After conducting a fact-check, it was revealed that the video dated back to 2018 and “it depicted members of the Dawood Bohra sect ... The community believes in zero food waste. The people seen in the video were part of one such Dawoodi Bohra Danaa Committee and were not licking clean plates, but rather the plates they were eating in before washing the utensils (Bose, 2020). It was also rumored that in the city of Karachi in Pakistan the Hindus were denied food supplies. According to the reports, as published in *Ahmedabad Mirror* on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020: “Amid COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of poor people gathered at Rehri Goth in Karachi to receive food supplies and daily essentials. However, those who belong to the Hindu community were told to go back since the rations were only meant for Muslims” (ANI, 2020). But, again a fact-check proved it to be fake news and the reality was that due to a shortage of supplies people from all the religions were unable to receive rations. A Muslim man named Mehboob Ali “was beaten to death by violent mob in Delhi’s Bawana after he was falsely suspected of a conspiracy to spread COVID-19” (TDN World, 2020). “One of the key features of anti-Muslim sentiment in India for quite a long time has been the idea that Muslims themselves are a kind of infection in the body politic” (Arjun Appadurai quoted in Perrigo, 2020) and today it has undergone a neo-racial turn through which “Islamophobia has been transposed onto the coronavirus issue” (Amir Ali quoted in Perrigo, 2020).

Moreover, Tablighi Jamaat was not the only social gathering that took place during the rise of Coronavirus cases in India. Before and after the nationwide lockdown, several social and religious gatherings have been taking place across the country, which have been reported by the media in a much normalized fashion. Niharika Sharma, in her article “The Nizamuddin meet wasn’t the only instance of callousness in India amid the Covid-19 scare” (2020) examines that “callousness isn’t restricted to any group or community in India”. For instance, on the occasion of International Women’s Day (8<sup>th</sup> March), a public gathering was organized at Rashtrapati Bhawan; on 15<sup>th</sup> March a wedding ceremony was organized by the state legislator of Karnataka for his daughter and it was attended by several people; on 24<sup>th</sup> March the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh attended an event that was associated with the celebration of Ram Navami (a Hindu festival that celebrates the birthday of Lord Rama) in Ayodhya; on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020 “thousands of devotees assembled in temples in various parts of West Bengal on the occasion of Ram Navami ... giving a thumbs down to social distancing norms prescribed by the government during the ongoing nationwide lockdown period” (Press

Trust of India, 2020), etc. For the Indian media, these activities are mere ‘gatherings’ and the Markaz is the only ‘mayhem’. Shahid Siddiqui, an ex-parliamentarian and a resident of Nizamuddin laments: “Today it looks as though the problem of the virus has been resolved and Nizamuddin dargah is the Centre of everything” (quoted in Beg, 2020).

Besides racializing the local natives of Northeast India and the Muslims, the “standards of human worth” were subjected to “relentless assault” (Bauman, 2000, p. 212) when the “migrant workers, returning home during a nationwide coronavirus lockdown, were doused in bleach disinfectant used to sanitize buses” (Gupta, Mitra, Sud, 2020). A senior officer justified this incident as: “We spread them here as a part of the disinfection drive, we don’t want them to be carriers of virus and it could be hanging on their clothes...” (quoted in Gupta, Mitra, Sud, 2020). This is what Nelson-Maldonado Torres identifies as “coloniality in lived experience” (2007, p. 242) during which “the body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (Fanon, 2000, p. 258). The uncertainty leads to “dismemberment, subjectivisation, domination, control and exploitation” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, p. 23). As a result, chemicals that are used to disinfect buses and cars are being sprayed on the migrant workers to justify the ‘dirtiness’ and ‘diseases’ of the labor class in India. The migrant workers are treated as what Enrique Dussel formulates as “excluded barbarians” (1999, p. 120). Such “overzealous actions” (Lav Agarwal quoted in Gupta, Mitra, Sud, 2020) are influenced by a sense of “existential immobility” or “stuckedness” (Hage, 2009, p. 98) “that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good to everyone” (Mignolo, 2005, p. 6).

The already existing violent and exploitative languages of salvation, progress and modernization in contemporary India get further manifested through Covid-19 in the form of gendered racism, which is “often difficult to pinpoint, and can be therefore hard to counter” (Essed, 2001). In order to further elaborate, let us analyze the situation of the transgender community. Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli, a trans-activist from Hyderabad, expresses her concern towards her community members: “The spectre of raw fear denudes my hope as a structurally excluded transgender woman. MONSTROUS HOARDING of essential food supplies by some self-aggrandising savage haves is getting murderous against have-nots!! Many provisions were sold out” (quoted in Choudhary, 2020). Severe socio-cultural inequalities and lack of proper education and job facilities compel a majority of the transgenders to rely on daily wage activities like begging, dancing and sex-work. Anindya Hajra, a transwoman who works on transgender livelihood issues with the Pratyay Gender Trust contemplates: “They do not have the social privilege of operating within a distant ‘online’ world when their lives are precariously balanced on the thread of social interaction and functions” (quoted in Reuters, 2020). Therefore, the countrywide lockdown has created havoc in their life. Preety Choudhury in her article “Being a trans person in India during Covid-19 pandemic” (2020) reveals: “While Rajasthan civil rights workers have demanded relief packages for daily wage workers, the Kerala and Uttar Pradesh state governments have already announced financial aid in addition to bulk rations for the next 6 months ... However, there is no separate mention of transgenders as beneficiaries in any of these proportions” (2020). Due to lack of bank accounts and citizenship identity cards (voters card, adhaar card,

etc.) they are unable to receive state benefits as well. Many hospitals are reluctant to admit transgenders for medical tests and also there are no separate hospital wards for them.

Altogether, these various forms of social, cultural, gender and economic subjugations holistically contribute towards preserving a “racially hierarchized ... patriarchal ... hetero-normative, capitalist ... colonial, imperial and modern form of civilization” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 15). Through Covid-19, the racially hierarchized patterns of modern civilization in postcolonial India have re-generated a template for neo-racial re-ordering, which is guarded by two horseheads. The following section will elaborately reflect on it.

### **‘Corona-logy’: Re-Configuring a Neo-Racial Order**

Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (2014) argues that the socio-political and epistemological systems, through which certain sections of postcolonial societies are marginalized, disregarded, silenced and violently eliminated (Lacey, 2015, p. 161), give birth to “cognitive injustice” (237). The evolution of cognitive injustice has taken place through the development of the “cognitive empire or the metaphysical empire”, which “continues to impact and impinge” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019) the present and the futures of postcolonial nations like India. The present activities of marginalization, elimination and silencing of the Northeasterners, the Muslims, the transgenders and the migrant workers are actuated by the cognitive injustice of the metaphysical colonial empire that functions under the veil of “agent –centered acts” (Mould, 2005, p. 257) like collective development, health and community welfare. Once the veil is removed, the real agenda of these acts – dehumanization and borderization comes to the forefront in the following manner:

- a. Dehumanization: The invasion of Coronavirus in India has enabled the power-keepers to transmute the already existing chronologies of social, cultural, communal and economic racisms into a well-defined structure of Corona-logy. Corona-logy can be defined as a neo-colonial and neo-racial civilizational project that uses the logic of a disease named Covid-19 to unpack newly configured social groups, who are being microscopically confined within the narrow chambers of racialization, criminalization, victimization and dehumanization. On the one hand, this civilizational project allows the power-keepers to unburden themselves from all forms of humanitarian responsibilities and on the other side they can successfully hide their “sinister motives” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The subjugation of certain social sections, as mentioned above, are not new (Ramaswami, 2012; Das, 2014; Shaikh, 2020; Subrahmaniam, 2020). But, the logic of Coronavirus in India is simplifying this process further and is successfully curating a reservoir of “post-Covid-19 social, cultural, political and scientific narratives of violence” which “will function as a strong support system” to practice dehumanization in the near future (Malima, Dey, 2020).
- b. Metaphysical Borderization: Through dehumanization corona-logy has successfully generated metaphysical borderization – borders that exist beyond the “physical barriers” (Toal, Merabishvili, 2019, p. 110) of barbed wires. The physically invisible

borders or the metaphysical borders manufacture an “intensifying terrifying territoriality” in which “an escape route is kept open, or identified, only to ensure the protagonists’ death” (Nayar, 2017, p. 2). The local natives of Northeast India, the Muslims, the transgenders and the migrant workers have been experiencing a similar form of terrifying territoriality and it is gradually pushing them towards permanently subjugated spaces, within which racial marginalizations and socio-cultural crises are habitually normalized and practiced.

This is how, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, these two horseheads have been functioning as powerful catalysts towards re-configuring a neo-racial “postcolonial neo-colonized world” (Spivak, 1990, p. 84) order through the logic of a biomedical crisis.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole, the social, cultural, political, economic and geographical chronologies of racial practices in India, which have been systematically embedded within the habitual existential psyche since the European colonial era, are further strengthened by ‘Corona-logy’. Corona-logy enables certain sections of the society, governing institutions and the media houses to use the crisis of Covid-19 as a logical weapon in order to unleash and widen new forms of racism in the country. On the basis of diseases, the citadels of “race stratification” (Light, Roscigno, Kalev, 2011, p. 39), which were once erected by the European colonizers in India, are being re-manufactured, re-asserted and re-normalized through the “bio-medical mechanisms” (Cooper, Steinhauer, Miller, David, Schatzkin, 1981, p. 389) of Covid-19. It is successfully destroying the existential base of certain selected sections of the Indian society from which they “launch themselves into the world” (Thiong’o, 2009, p. 28). Thus, it is crucial to realize that the racial experiences of the local natives of Northeast India, the migrant workers and the transgenders, which have been thoroughly problematized and theoretically argued in this paper, not only unfurl the present scenario of extreme existential inequalities, but also function as a sharp warning bell for an acute humanitarian crises in the near future.

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