

Beyond The Physical Symptoms Of The Virus - A Phenomenological Analysis Of Vicarious Discrimination Faced By North-Easterns During COVID-19 Outbreak

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ABSTRACT

The aftermath of COVID-19 was multifaced. Since, the origin of this virus was from China, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed hate and xenophobia against the Asians. A similar situation was observed in India as multiple hate crimes were reported against the North-eastern Indians. Possibly it brought to the surface the already subdued biasness emanating from the cultural differences. Discriminatory content on social media took many forms like posting and sharing of derogatory content, racial epithets, stereotyping, symbols of hate, implicit and explicit racist statements, graphic representations of physical and sexual harm to women and children etc. This paper aims to explore and understand the experiences of vicarious discriminatory experiences of individuals from north-eastern India during the outbreak of COVID-19. Data is collected and interpreted following a phenomenological approach. The analysis from the interviews of the eight participants revealed three interlinked superordinate themes. 1) Awareness of vulnerability 2) Racism is a standard process 3) Minority lives do not matter during crises. Obtaining insights into the processes involved could be instrumental in understanding the ground level problems faced by the regional minorities in India, making inclusion policies and programmes to develop harmony and sensitization of the mainlanders, and modifying the internet safety protocols in the country.

Keywords- vicarious discrimination, COVID-19, north-easterns, social media, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

India, along with the rest of the world faced the wrath of the coronavirus which emerged on December 2019, from Wuhan, China. The aftermath of the virus was multifaced ranging from decline in general health and well-being to exposing the economic and social inequalities in the society. The stigma associated with the novel disease was beyond the biological paradigm (Davis et al., 2021). Since, the origin of this virus was from China, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed hate and xenophobia against the Asians residing in the European countries. People of Asian descent have been targets of demeaning language in the press and on the social media platforms (Grover et al., 2020). Researchers like David Chae (2021) confirmed that globally the minorities faced, harassment on racial grounds during the covid-19 outbreak, leading to several mental health outcomes.

United Nations Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues in March 2021, shows concern in addressing the rising online hate speech against minority groups which followed by hate crimes and violence (Citaristi, 2022).

As individuals from NE and people of the Chinese origin share the same mongoloid features, a similar situation was observed in India. Before we define this venerable problem in the new light of COVID-19, it is a prerequisite to understand the potential trajectory leading to the current biasness towards the individuals from NE. India's nexus of identities amalgamates in the north-east with eight states strikingly different and yet grouped together due to close physical proximity to each other and a common 'tribal' face with distance from the mainland India (Bora, 2019). In the colonial period, British introduced the concept of race in Indian minds and accentuated the differences in terms of physical features, language, food habits etc (Rich, 1990). According to Durkheim, with the conception of the idea of race, racism has existed (Lehmann, 1995). Racism is as a social fact like any other social phenomenon existing without the need of it being repeated every time to prove its existence. In no time, the difference in shared cultural and group practices which is ethnicity of the seven states was overlapped by the racial differences. These individuals were and are racially discriminated in their own motherland.

During Pandemic, there was anxiety, fear and confusion regarding the prognosis of the virus and stigmatization of the disease with the NE people, aggravated the situation. Multiple hate crimes were reported from all over the country during asking the NE migrants to vacate houses, incidents like spitting on them to not letting them enter any social premises (Haokip, 2021). There brewed a negative public attitude, or possibly it brought to the surface the already subdued biasness emanating from the cultural differences and the insensitivity towards the individuals from the NE. There was derogatory content on the social media about the NE people, and because of lockdown restrictions, the average internet usage increased. The early writings posited that internet had the possibility of reducing cultural discrimination (Kahn et al., 2013). However, recent theorizing reveal that it makes individuals more susceptible to experiencing racial discrimination (Kahn, et al., 2013). The visual content on social media manifests and multiples the racist ideologies. It's not just the videos, but racism may manifest in undisguised forms in the online context. Amidst all these, there is ongoing outflow of locals from these regions to the metro cities and education and employment are main reasons apart from the chain migration phenomenon, accountable

Vicarious discrimination

Harrell (2000) stated that one of the many ways in which individuals belonging to the minority groups experience racism, is through vicarious racism experiences. When they experience second hand racism, they come to the realization that they are also vulnerable to racism that the individual has vicariously experienced. The realisation that they can be vulnerable to such second-hand acts of discrimination is psychologically and emotionally as impacting as a direct act of racism. The key element differentiating direct discrimination from vicarious or second-hand discrimination is that the target is intentional in the first and unintentional or accidental in the second category respectively. The other prerequisite is the unintentional target should somehow identify with the targeted minority group in some form or the other. Neuroscience models provide evidence of a mirroring effect on individuals experiencing the content of racism online or through merely observing or hearing about it (David, 2021) Conceptual work by Gee and colleagues (Gee et al., 2012) underscores that

Life Course Theory's principle of linked lives highlights the interconnectedness of social networks and suggests that the racial discrimination experiences of one person can influence interactions with proximal others such as family members and friends and influence their outcomes. (Keum, 2017).

Social identity theory posits that individuals draw their identity from the social group they belong to. The collective sense of self-esteem is relative to the public opinion of the group. Thus, upholding and maintaining the status quo of the group in all public domains including the internet is a part of maintaining one's social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Thus, acts that belittle the entire group have an impact on the group members' s mental health. Race is a debatable topic in India. The 1991 Liberalization in our country, further impacted the migration on the backdrop of the ongoing race vs caste debates (Topalova, 2010). There are different layers which bifurcates the Indian ethnic groups- *caste and race* are not same and the systems co-exist in the Indian sub-continent. Indian social and cultural systems have been clutched by the casteism, colonial history, regional disparities, and economic inequalities. An individual can be cross sectionally affiliated into several ethnic groups in India. In west, Asians were being discriminated at the hands of the Europeans who according to the Social Identity Theory were ingroups vs the outgroup. However, the same precise identification and bifurcation of in groups and out groups cannot happen in case of north-east Indians, as all of them identify as Indians living their own motherland. Relatively little research has addressed this gap to understand separately the experiences of online discrimination in the context of India, where different races have had a peaceful history and fought against the invaders, as a country.

With the advent of internet based vicarious racism typically during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the present study has been planned to capture the lived experiences of second hand or vicarious internet-based discrimination of these individuals, using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Smith & Osborn (2015) advocated that IPA is the most useful qualitative research method for examining topics that are ambiguous, complex, novel, and emotionally laden. It lets the researcher understand what it is like for the person experiencing the phenomenon. Online vicarious discrimination on the backdrop of COVID-19, is a prime exemplar of such phenomenon.

Thus, to help in developing a body of knowledge regarding this concept of second-hand discrimination typically faced by north-eastern individuals, IPA was adopted.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What it is like to experience vicarious social media discrimination during the COVID-19 outbreak?

This question was framed based on the personal experience of the first author and the related input from various sources discussed earlier.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The context of the present study is entirely based on the personal experience of vicarious discrimination on social media, faced by the first author, who happens to be a resident of Assam. Through personal discussion with others, ongoing phenomena in the social media and related research in the western context, this study was materialised.

METHOD

Participants

To fulfil the commitment of idiographic depth, IPA is conducted on a small homogeneous sample. (Smith et al., 2009). A close assessment of the sample and a focus on the context are specifically required to achieve the idiographic depth and to achieve this, a purposive sample of 8 (5 females and 3 males) participants, residing in Delhi/NCR and belonging to the north-eastern states of India were taken. The participants were aged between 31-40 years and the mean age of the participants is 35.8 years. Participants were selected via snowball sampling. Only individuals, who acknowledged viewing such content online and feeling discriminated, were included in the study. Each participant was interviewed by the first author via zoom or google meet. Ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) were followed in conducting this study.

Data Collection Procedure

Recruitment

The potential participants who met the inclusion criteria of belonging to any of the eight states of the North-eastern India and who have viewed the discriminatory content on social media during the COVID -19 outbreak. The first two participants were identified from the personal circle of the first author, as she belongs to Assam, one of the states situated in the north-east of India. Snowball technique was used to complete the predetermined number of participants. The potential participants were then approached over phone calls for discussing the background of the study. They were provided with the participant information sheet and were asked to clear their queries regarding the study.

Interviews

Data was collected using in-depth interviews. For this, a provisional semi structured interview schedule was prepared by the first and the third authors, which was reviewed by the second author. The key areas interviewed were- can you describe what it is to experience second hand discrimination on social media? Can you describe how it impacted your life during the COVID-19 outbreak? Can you describe how you feel about yourself and the world in general after this? Interviews were conducted by the first author using the Zoom video call. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants.

Data Analysis

Our research followed the procedures given by Smith, Flowers & Larkins in 2009. IPA calls for a close reading of each transcript in its own terms and the documentation of emergent themes. This preliminary analysis of each transcript, the themes from all the transcripts were correlated, eventually leading to the generation of key themes with the intent to capture the main, relevant features of the texts. The analysis was carried out in two major phases. In the first phase, the first author carried out the above analytic process in dialogue with the other authors. A further analysis was carried out by the third author, again in dialogue with the other authors. The final analysis presented is an amalgamation of these two stages of analysis. The second phase of the writing preparation was done via multiple discussions between the authors on the final themes and the super ordinate theme structure.

Reflexivity

The subjective perspective is fundamentally intertwined with the qualitative research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). With the onset of the pandemic, the news of north-easterns facing discrimination amid the panic over COVID -19, which emerged from China. It once again brought to surface the discrimination faced by these individuals in their motherland and the experiences, people in the first author's social circle experienced. Along with this, the second author's expertise and the third author's interest in exploring the lived experience of vicarious discrimination faced by individuals from north-east of India. Yardley (2000) criteria were referred to consistently to keep the quality intact in a qualitative study.

Ethical considerations

The research proposal was approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee for Social Sciences at Jamia Milia Islamia. All the ethical standards (informed consent, permission to record, confidentiality, anonymity, debriefing) were met during the study.

RESULTS

Theme 1 -Awareness of vulnerability

Anticipation of discrimination

All participants expressed feeling the anticipation of discrimination and that this feeling seems to create a series of efforts to save oneself. The participants reported feeling 'on the edge' in social situations.

P8 express his anticipation and says that- *'I feel like I will be attacked in public and then someone might be filming it. The individuals in the videos just went out like that to get groceries and got the brunt'*. He further elaborated that he was repeatedly asked to be careful by his family members, so he went back to his hometown as soon as the travel relaxations were there - *I went to my hometown just when they allowed travelling, I don't know if there was any other way, I was already dealing with it for a couple of months'*

While anticipation sudden negative events, the participants felt that they developed mistrust towards their local counterparts. P4 recalls having a conversation about access to healthcare on priority for the locals with a colleague.

'I remember him mentioning a couple of times that India should not cater to the medical needs like supplying the vaccination etc. of others but he eventually ended up saying that Delhi should treat only the local COVID-19 infected patients'

P4 came back to this colleague's part in the interview and mentioned that this feeling of mistrust could be a result of all the content on social media.

'Now that I speak about all these in details, I think he might not have directed the statement towards me, but there was a lot going on, quite a possibility that both of us were influenced, but then again there was someone in his mind, while he spoke, somebody from a different state, he didn't want to share the resources with.'

P1 recalls changes in her behaviour – *'I am a social person, and I have made some very good friends in Delhi, but on a few occasions, I think I avoided the group video calls or eventually*

the weekend meetings because there will be friends of friends and I don't know everyone's opinion of my community (Naga).'

On probing further, she added *'I work with researchers, so my social circle always has people who are socially and politically aware and even when I was sharing these discriminatory posts online, no one came up to me, this still makes me feel bad'*

She felt that since they were not voicing this out on the social media, they might silently support all these, and she could be the target of subtle discrimination.

Women are the easy targets

The participants expressed profound despair regarding the fact that north-eastern women go through a lot of discrimination and even in COVID-19 it was the same. One of the participants P2 compared the situation to the 'moral parameters the women of African origin in the US have to go through.'

She was heartbroken when she encountered the news of a Manipuri girl being spit upon and called 'Corona'.

'I guess we are the same as the women of African origin, they think we don't have moral principles and that is why this man could spit upon that girl, even when everyone is looking towards science to make a cure to the virus, the society still is so unscientific'.

P4 expressed her views on the similar 'moral grounds'. She said that the north-eastern women do perform so many roles but are always viewed through the negative lens.

'I am from Meghalaya and there are so many people who have asked me to help them getting a kong(nanny) for their babies here in Bangalore. They said these nannies are so well trained and hygienic. I know of so many nurses from north-east here. Why then the moral policing for us?'

She elaborated the contributions these women do the society are just overlooked and still 'not enough'

Other participants further elaborated as to how the online content should be carefully screened as it impacts them on many levels. P5 elaborated on this by emphasising that women are portrayed as the 'easy ones' and inferior in terms of their character and integrity. She goes by-

"I have to justify to my colleagues that my family is equally concerned about me when I am out at night...we are perceived as if we are asking for it...the freedom we get also comes with a lot of responsibility."

Other participants recalled similar experiences they had in college, and how the current experiences are a trigger to the past repressed events. They said that when roommates would show concern as to sharing room with the NE girls and to avoid 'influence' and how discrimination during the pandemic, brought everything to the forefront, P4 recalls-

"This is not something new, a roommate's family was very concerned about her getting influenced by me...I did not know how to respond that time, but the COVID related discriminatory incidents, I was actively responding to such trolling online."

The notions about females from NE impact these individuals and they find themselves feeling inferior and powerless, over-compensating for and anticipating such judgements.

Theme 2- Racism is a standard social procedure

Racism is a matter of time and place

The participants viewed the discriminatory acts as relative to time and place. Participant P8 compared to this situation, saying *'there is a similar situation back home'*

'The mainlanders living in our states, probably have to go through such similar experiences, maybe not so harsh, but who knows?'

P7 further elaborates that *'I feel we humans are just getting carried away with these not so important things, it's just the context we are in, which makes us loose our minds'*

In a way he tries to place himself in their shoes and says, *'maybe I also was not sensitive towards other people during a problem'*

To varying degrees, all participants accounts reflected a vital problem of racism being an inevitable part of the world. They felt that even when the world was dealing with the sudden outbreak of the pandemic, the differences in the ingroup and out-groups still existed or rather came to the forefront. On the backdrop of a novel health emergency, humanity still succumbed to racism. The world is divided on the lines of who has the political and social powers, and it has the capacity to make the minorities feel powerless.

'Don't you think it's so much a part of the world? We were treated this way during the bad times, and maybe always will be considered this way, I think we will always be made to feel inferior....(P6)

Other participant P2 shared an instance of how racism is a global issue and that there are multiple posts on social media from various places, about the way Asians become one community in Europe and then the mongoloid features do not create boundaries within them. This clearly brings out the fact that racism could possibly be a matter of time and place and the cross-sectional combination of both. She goes like-

'the same Indians forget about these differences when living in Europe, the shape of the eyes do not matter then, we are all Asians then, I felt treated like an Indian more when I was out of India(P2)

The participants acknowledged that the problem also existed out of the current context and that this is a global issue. As soon as one side feels superior in terms of being the majority in number, having a strong geographical familiarity, holding social and political positions, unavoidably the other side becomes the minority. The power struggle in the society is present both at the macro and the micro level and it further becomes more evident during a crisis.

P6 and P7 questioned the basic nature in which the society is formed. P7 said it was 'flawed'. The power dynamics according to her are distributed as same as the 'jungle law.' She feels that humans lose their human touch, in exchange for resources. or mere survival.

Inferiority and superiority are relative to each other

The participants expressed their views on the way society is constructed. The majority and minority differences does exist because as one participant quoted that ‘not everyone can be powerful’. This participant P6 quoted, *‘there cannot be equal distribution of power, there will be someone who will be more powerful.’*

Another participant P8 elaborated saying that – *‘this is how the democracy runs, sometimes these discriminatory acts are done to deliberately make the other group feel powerful.’*

P8 feels that the society is organised to make one feel superior at the cost of the other one feeling inferior. The modern democracy is coming out in the form of ‘domination’, and this comes from the control and dispersion of power as one participant says that, *‘I don’t feel powerful here, maybe I actually I don’t have any power here, so I pray I don’t fall into any trouble, I don’t know powerful people here’*

Participant P1, says that power is and always will be in the hands of majority, but pandemic made people misuse the power, *‘I feel the confusion and fear around COVID-19 just brought out the uglier side of the ongoing phenomenon, the way some people misbehaved was pure dominance.’*

The uncertainties around COVID brought out the power in the form of dominance which started unreasonable accusations to the whole north-east community

Theme 3- Minority lives do not matter during crisis**The damage was not equally distributed**

The participants were of the view that repercussions of the pandemic were not equally distributed. They felt their communities went through immense emotional pain, and it will take a long time to wipe it out. P2 strongly feels that social media ‘highlighted’ it and the impact will be ‘long lasting’ since its no more ‘under the carpet’

She says that, *‘I know it’s happening with any other minority individual and we are talking about it here, because of COVID-19, it’s no more under the carpet, there are some people who are left with a lifetime of injustice to deal with. Everything is public, the good and the bad both, now because of the social media,*

P5 expressed similar feelings saying that, *‘I think I have always felt this way, but I have never complained, but this time my fears came true, we are yet not accepted as Indians’*

On probing further, P5 said he feels ‘hopeless’ regarding their acceptance by the rest of the Indian states. He expressed his anguish saying that these incidents o discrimination, killed the last rays of hope, he unconsciously was harbouring.

‘I was hoping everything is under control and humanity is above everything, I didn’t realise that COVID killed the last rays of hope I had towards a community building’

He felt that all this happened so fast that he never got time to realize that minorities have faced much more than just the biological impact of the pandemic. He said they will always have the other emotional and psychological damage to deal with and talk about.

Minority individuals became the scapegoat for the mainlanders

The participants pointed out that the similarity with the Chinese on the mongoloid features and the scarcity of resources during COVID, brought to the surface how limited resources can lead to such prejudice and discriminatory acts.

P8 elaborates on this by saying that *'it was all hunky dory until the pandemic, there were incidents of discrimination, but labelling us as Chinese, now, is plainly so mean.... the only reason I can think of is the sharing of resources, that makes people irrational'*

He further expanded that, the core of the discriminatory behaviour is probably the same, which is sharing of resources, but this time on the face of adversity and uncertainty. He explains that he was hurt, that the mainlanders were blaming them for both the 'cause of corona' and the 'cause of everything else'

In a similar vein, P6 said 'I feel like a culprit' but for what 'I don't know.'

DISCUSSION

India is a subcontinent with multiple races, castes, religions with one common thread that is the nationality. On the peripheral level the homogeneity amidst the differences is flawless as we do blend in as Indians. However, when we dig deeper and take a closer look at the homogeneity, separate and distinct individual identities appear, struggling to mark their space at the cost of one another. An Indian can now be cross sectionally divided into various categories, mutually exclusive of each other, thus, an individual can have multiple social identities and roles. However, one phenomenon on which the basic structure of these various social identities and roles have been dependent on – need to affiliate and protect the group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Britishers had coined the term, 'Mongoloid Fringe' and the 'North easterns' which states that the individual identity of the states was nullified, then itself (Haokip, 2011). By stating the geographical location of the region in relation to the location of the mainland, brought in the secondary status for its people. Further, grouping them under one broad label, dissolved the individual existence of these eight states. Thus, these individuals find themselves protecting their collective identity, as migrants both in and outside their states. The participants felt related to the term north-easterns, outside of north-east, because of place-making and community building practices. The uncertainty of being safe outside of north-east, drawn from the discriminatory incidents from the past and present of fellow migrants, mitigated by the hope of opportunity is what the migrants go through. This was clearly depicted in the excerpts of the participants. However, these discriminatory incidents which happened during the pandemic, made the participants and the rest of the north-eastern, less hopeful and alienated. The distinct discriminatory acts which happened with a Manipuri woman and many others, being labelled as 'Corona' was hurtful for the other fellow north-easterns to watch on social media. The journey from 'Mongoloid Fringe' to 'North-easterns' to 'Chinky' to now 'Corona' have been long and painful for every north-eastern (Haokip, 2021). The sense of self-concept is largely dependent on the group one identifies with, thus these participants felt threatened and vulnerable after viewing this content online, even the discriminatory acts were not carried out towards these individuals directly. These kinds of vicarious discriminatory experiences, were felt by the participants, albeit the uncertainty of the pandemic, the lockdown restrictions etc. An in-depth analysis of their experiences gives a clear account of

how certain media messages made them feel alienated, secluded in the toughest times, when people seemed to have lost their human values. The analysis of the accounts shared by the eight participants, speaks volumes about how the media became, a means to vent out the anger towards the north-easterns and labelling them as 'Chinese' and how the north-easterns would get impacted, become involved in online activism, and seek validation from other minority groups. Social media is indeed feasible, people get easily involved in the process of discrimination and feeling discriminated as well. The content in social media is usually consensually accepted and in the other scenario, this content in the due course of time becomes widely accepted (McKinley et al., 2014).

The analysis also throws light on how the anger towards the north-east community was encouraged on social media, and to the reason there was anger in the situation. Mere resemblance with the Chinese and the shared mongoloid inheritance appeared to be there, however on deeper evaluation of the feelings and experiences, of the participants accounts point towards the basic flaw in the structure of the society. North-east community in their own motherland were mere the 'scapegoats', blamed for something they had no remote relation to. History has many such events, where the dominant group has scapegoated the minority and dispersed their aggression (Townsend, 2003). But in this context the minority was ripped off their credibility as Indians and then forcefully aligned with outsiders. These incidents of 'spitting' on a Manipuri female in public is a result of labelling the women from these regions as 'easy' and not having the typical Indian values of the indigenous Indian females, somehow justifying the scapegoating and the discrimination. The 'otherness' of these kinds of incidents, have duly impacted the individuals of these communities (Roy, 2005).

Further evaluation brought out one possible reason for such biased behaviour. The accounts of participants, brings into light the fear associated with the optimum utilisation of the resources during the crises (Caselli & Coleman, 2013). The country was not prepared to face the virus, and hence the instinctual drive to save oneself and the group members, seemed to have pitched in. The fundamental question of defining the group members arises. The definition of group members, in the given context is on the racial lines, completely ignoring the other bigger similarity of being Indians. The metaphor used by one of the participants for herself was comparing to the 'African females', who were considered less than in character and integrity than the 'white females (Glick et al., 2000) The social media messages have directly and indirectly affected their self-concept, and their manner of relating to other females.

The analysis of the excerpts revolves around how reality and social reality could be different, and how social media makes original reality inaccessible (Shrum, 2009). As portrayed by the cultivation theory, traditional media use could effectively construct a social certainty, influenced by the media sources. This kind of reality is selective in nature (Morgan et al., 2014) This could mean that the minorities can have their own set of facts they relate and simultaneously another set of facts for the other group. This was visible as the data analysis revealed that racial discrimination could be a matter of time and place. The phenomenon which took place against the north-easterns, arose out of the belief, that they might exhaust the resources during the crises or rather they have perfect resemblance to the ones who caused this. Likewise, the minorities became more susceptible to the biased information on social media, probably felt more vulnerable and threatened in unbiased situations. The social reality created in this manner is dangerous and one can get carried

away. These days the media platforms and accessibility to these platforms is very feasible. All the social media software applications are available on a cell phone and these platforms routinely apply personalization algorithms to ensure the content which appears is preferred, relevant and indulging in nature (Dijck, 2013). A vicious loop is created, and it can be highly misleading, impacting the individual's views and feelings. The participants on a couple of occasions did mention that, living out of northeast has not always been threatening. The wave of 'otherness' and 'alienation' was a by-product of the 'hate content' on social media.

The results generated from the study have given insights into the social processes which directly and indirectly contribute to maintenance of group preferences and discrimination and the way the north-easterns dealt with both COVID as global citizens and hate and fear as Indians. However, the sample size has been small, keeping in mind the in-depth analysis of the qualitative nature of work. Further, research can focus on many other unexplored domains of subtle forms of first hand and vicarious discrimination in the country.

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