

# CORONA-LOGY: A RE-CONFIGURATION OF RACIAL DYNAMICS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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## Abstract

*The practice of racism is underpinned by various parameters: religion, geography, class, gender, and so forth. These underlying parameters have been faking their own insignificance and disappearance (Santos 2020) in such a systemic fashion that they successfully continue to operate in a naturalised and multiplicative manner in the contemporary era. For instance, let us look into the recent incidents of communal (stigmatisation 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) racism that India have been experiencing amidst the COVID-19 crisis. 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 • communal • geographical • gender • re-configure • racial dynamics • contemporary India

## 1. 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 personal experiences, she also shares the racialised experiences of her niece, who is pursuing master's at Delhi University (DU). 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. [I] waited for 10–15 minutes, but no 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 negation[s] of human equality' (Ahmad 2017, 1) are gradually getting re-configured and re-justified in different parts of India. Thokchom Singhajit, the general secretary of the 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), underwent severe trauma, as she was forcefully admitted to a hospital for a medical checkup. The only reason behind her hospitalisation 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 2020). The nurses in Assam are being 'verbally harassed and called coronavirus by people on the streets' (Saikia 2020). These instances reveal how the practice of racism on the basis of 'the color line' (Du Bois 1903, 71), as introduced by the projects of European colonisation, has culminated into an 'epistemic line' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 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 sociopolitical spaces and dehumanises certain sections of the society in the process. These consistent practices of systemic and epistemic

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dehumanisation also lead to hyperincarceration. Dominique Moran and Anna Schliehe in 'Introduction: Co-production and Carceral Spatiality' observe '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, 5). India is undergoing similar experiences of criminalisation, victimisation, marginalisation, and racial imprisonment. Apart from the racially motivated physical and verbal attacks on the local natives of Northeast India, Muslims, transgender persons, and migrant laborers are being subjected to severe forms of racial discrimination throughout the pandemic of COVID-19, which has been used as a 'logic of racism' (Roth 2005, 255) by individuals as well as sociopolitical institutions. This situation can be defined as a form of 'civilisational crisis' (Césaire 2000, 29). Aimé Césaire argued, 'A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a sick civilization. A civilization that plays fast and loose with its principals is a dying civilization' (Césaire 2000, 31). Within this biomedical disaster of COVID-19, the civilisation crisis has exposed a swarm of other disasters like 'migratory crisis, imperial violence, austerity governance, and other forms of structural and systemic violence all acting as a disordered jumble upon a collective body that cannot distinguish a main event or a discrete set of impacts' (Bonilla 2020).

Keeping these arguments in the background, the research paper focuses on the following questions:

- How has the biomedical crisis of COVID-19 opened up gateways for communal, geographical, and gender crisis in contemporary India?
- How have these multiple forms of crises re-configured the already existing racial dynamics in contemporary India through 'corona-logy'?

Based on these two questions, this paper, over four sections, explores the various racial factors that have transmuted the medical pandemic into a communal-, geographical-, and panic-demic. 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. The second section, 'Re-Systemising Racism during COVID-19', moves the argument forward by reflecting upon how the society, the media and the governing institutions are systematically targeting 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 the use of COVID-19 as an invisible weapon of racial violence (Petu 2017). The third section, "Corona-logy: Re-Configuring a Neo-Racial Order," outlines the different theoretic 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', summarises the arguments and the findings of this paper.

## 2. Objectives

The central objective of this paper is to analyse how COVID-19 has not only created a biomedical crisis in India but also opened a gateway for different forms of communal, geographical, class, and gender crisis. Through these crises the already existing racial hierarchies in India have been re-configured in a multidimensional manner.

Both theoretically and practically, this paper explores the various ways through which COVID-19 has given birth to 'corona-logy'—a new logic that uses the present pandemic crisis as a weapon to preserve the European, colonially structured social, cultural, and racial hegemonies in contemporary India.

## 3. Materials and Methods

In order to achieve the central objective of the paper, the researcher has adopted a qualitative research methodology. Under this methodology, the researcher conducted thorough case studies on the various forms of communal, racial, geographical, and gender violence that are taking place during the country-wide lockdown in India. As the researcher is currently based in Bhutan and is in self-quarantine, it was not possible for him to engage in any kind of field work. Therefore, the case studies are based on newspaper and blog articles that are available online. The authenticity of the documents has been ensured by the researcher only specifically referring to articles that have been published by renowned national and international platforms.

Besides conducting case studies, the theoretical argument of the paper has been developed through different research articles and essays on colonisation, race, and gender. Some of the theorists who have been referred to are Zygmunt Bauman, Aimé Césaire, Enrique Dussel, Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Dignolo, Partha Chatterjee, Pramod Kumar Nayar, Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and so forth. Apart from these globally experienced philosophers, several young and new thinkers have also been referred to in this paper so that the problem of racism in contemporary India can be analysed as diversely as possible over different moments of space and time. In order to problematise a local crisis, the researcher has referred to the works of philosophers across the world for two major reasons. First, in order to understand the racial

designs of 'corona-logy', it is important to understand the issue of racism in general. Second, though the communal, geographical, and gender crises have been discussed with respect to India, it still exists in different forms and intensities across the globe. These materials and methods have assisted the researcher in finding two crucial results, which will be detailed in the following sections: 'Re-Systematising Racism during COVID-19' and 'Corona-logy: Re-Configuring a Neo-Racial Order'.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Re-Systemising Racism during COVID-19

In 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926–35' (1982), Partha Chatterjee philosophises that 'religion provides an ontology, an epistemology, as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics' (1985). With the advent of COVID-19, the ontological, epistemological, and the political ethics of racism have received new impetus. In order to validate this argument, let us analyse how the Tablighi Jamaat congregation at Nizamuddin Markaz in New Delhi has been racially stigmatised. The Tablighi Jamaat is a 'Muslim missionary movement' (Bisht and Naqvi 2020) that organised a religious gathering in its headquarters at Nizamuddin Markaz in New Delhi. It is estimated that 'more than 6,000 people' attended the gathering (BS Web Team 2020) between 13 and 15 March of 2020. As per the newspaper reports, though the chief minister of New Delhi strictly ordered all people to avoid all forms of social, cultural, and religious gatherings on 16 March yet 'people at the Nizamuddin Markaz still continued to stay put' (Haider 2020). As a result, several individuals who had attended the event from different parts of the country tested positive. On 23 March, several residents of the Nizamuddin area were vacated. After the prime minister of India announced a three-week nationwide lockdown on 24 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 intention of re-authenticating Islamophobia and racially demeaning Muslims. But, what is the connection between the Tablighi Jamaat congregation, Islamophobia, and racism?

According to Ramón Grosfoguel and Eric Mielants, 'Islamophobia would be the subalternisation and inferiorisation of Islam produced by the Christian-centric religious hierarchy of the world system since the end of 15th century' (2006, 2). Muslims were always designated as 'others' by European colonisers and were globally constructed as a 'people without religion' (Maldonado-Torres 2006, 54). This epistemically

and ontologically designed religious difference created by European colonisers is characterised as 'imperial difference' by Walter Dignolo (2000, 75). The process of 'otherising' Muslims continues to take place in a neo-colonial manner in contemporary India through the domination of Hinducentrism, which consistently manufactures a 'disruptive, decivilising, dehumanising, exploitative, racist, violent, brutal, covetous and thingifying system' (Césaire 2000, 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 publicised 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 to imply that before the Jamaat congregation there were no issues of coronavirus in India. Muslims have been abused, being called 'Tablighi Virus' and 'Corona Jihad' (Perrigo 2020), with fake videos being created to falsely vilify them.

A video from Madhya Pradesh shows a Muslim fruit seller, who had recently returned from the Jamaat congregation, '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 was no fear of him spreading the coronavirus. Another video shows Muslim youths licking utensils to deliberately spread the 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', a community that 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 from before washing their 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 March 2020, 'amid [the] COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of poor people gathered at Rehri Ghoth 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 had not been 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 had been taking place across the country, which had been reported by the media in a much normalised 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 March), a public gathering was organised at Rashtrapati Bhawan; on 15 March, a wedding ceremony was organised by the state legislator of Karnataka for his daughter, and it was attended by several people; on 24 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 April, '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). 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 racialising the local natives of Northeast India and Muslims, the 'standards of human worth' were subjected to 'relentless assault' (Bauman 2000, 212) when the 'migrant workers, returning home during a nationwide coronavirus lockdown, were doused in bleach disinfectant used to sanitise buses' (Gupta, Mitra and 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 and Sud 2020). This is what Nelson-Maldonado Torres identifies as 'coloniality in lived experience' (2007, 242) during which 'the body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty' (Fanon 2000, 258). The uncertainty leads to 'dismemberment, subjectivisation, domination, control and exploitation' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 23). As a result, chemicals that are used to disinfect buses and cars were being sprayed on the migrant workers to justify the 'dirtiness' and 'diseases' of the labor class in India. The migrant workers were treated as, what Enrique

Dussel formulates, 'excluded barbarians' (1999, 120). Such 'overzealous actions' (Lav Agarwal quoted in Gupta, Mitra, and Sud 2020) are influenced by a sense of 'existential immobility' or 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009, 98) 'that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good to everyone' (Mignolo 2005, 6).

The already existing violent and exploitative languages of salvation, progress, and modernisation 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 analyse 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 sociocultural inequalities and lack of proper education and job facilities compel a majority of the transgender persons to rely on daily wage activities like begging, dancing, and sex-work. Anindya Hajra, a trans woman 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 a havoc in their life. Preety Choudhury, in her article 'Being a Transperson in India during Covid-19 Pandemic' (2020) reveals that '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 transgender persons for medical tests and also there are no separate hospital wards for them.

Together, 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, 15). Through COVID-19, the racially hierarchised patterns of modern civilisation in postcolonial India has re-generated a template for neo-racial re-ordering, which is guarded by two horse-heads. The following section will elaborately reflect on it.

#### 4.2. '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 sociopolitical and epistemological systems through which certain sections of postcolonial societies are marginalised, disregarded, silenced, and violently eliminated (Lacey 2015, 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 marginalisation, elimination, and silencing of Northeasterners, Muslims, transgender persons, and migrant workers are actuated by the cognitive injustice of the metaphysical colonial empire that functions under the veil of 'agent-centered acts' (Mould 2005, 257) like collective development, health, and community welfare. Once the veil is removed, the real agenda of these acts—dehumanisation and borderisation—comes to the forefront in the following manner.

##### 4.2.1. Dehumanisation

The invasion of coronavirus in India has enabled the power-keepers to transmute the already existing chronologies of social, cultural, communal, and economic racism into a well-defined structure of Corona-logy. Corona-logy can be defined as a neo-colonial and neo-racial civilisational project that uses the logic of a disease named COVID-19 to unpack newly configured social groups that are being microscopically confined within the narrow chambers of racialisation, criminalisation, victimisation, and dehumanisation. On the one hand, this civilisational project allows the power-keepers to unburden themselves from all forms of humanitarian responsibilities, and on the other hand, they can successfully hide their 'sinister motives' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). The subjugation of certain social sections, as mentioned above, is 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 dehumanisation in the near future (Malima and Dey 2020).

##### 4.2.2. Metaphysical Borderisation

Through dehumanisation corona-logy has successfully generated metaphysical borderisation—borders that exist beyond the 'physical barriers' (Toal and Merabishvili 2019, 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, 2). Local natives of Northeast India, Muslims, the transgender

community, and migrant workers have been experiencing a similar form of terrifying territoriality, and it is gradually pushing them towards permanently subjugated spaces within which racial marginalisations and sociocultural crises are habitually normalised and practiced.

This is how, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, these two horse-heads have been functioning as powerful catalysts towards re-configuring a neo-racial 'postcolonial neo-colonised world' (Spivak 1990, 84) order through the logic of a biomedical crisis.

## 5. 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 has enabled 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. It has also created a moment of 'necropolitics' that is characterised by 'exit from democracy', 'society of enmity', 'voice of blood', and 'terror and counter-terror as our time's medication and poison' (Mbembe 2019, 1). On the basis of diseases, the citadels of 'race stratification' (Light, Roscigno, and Kalev 2011, 39), which were once erected by the European colonisers in India, are being re-manufactured, re-asserted and re-normalised through the 'bio-medical mechanisms' (Cooper et al. 1981, 389) of COVID-19. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, in *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (2013), argues:

*Eurocentric conceptions of being human predicated on social classification and racial hierarchization in accordance with invented differential ontological densities; capitalist approaches to ecology and environment particularly their reduction to a natural resource which is causing worldwide ecological problems, condemnation of all other spiritualities through secularization while universalizing Christianity; and modern heteronormativity where gender is deployed to inferiorise and superiorise other people for purposes of enslavement, domination and exploitation. (76–77)*

In a similar fashion, India is advocating extreme practices of hierarchising different racial categories, nationalising high-caste Hinduism and de-existentialising 'other' forms of socio-religious narratives, and inferiorising the transgender community through the ethics of heteronormativity. All these dehumanising practices are successfully destroying the

existential base of certain selected sections of the Indian society from which they 'launch themselves into the world' (Thiong'o 2009, 28). Thus, it is crucial to realise that the racial experiences of the local natives of Northeast India, the migrant workers, and the transgender community, which have been thoroughly problematised 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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