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‘You people have brought the virus here’: Othering experience of northeastern people amid COVID-19 in Delhi, India

Abdul Azeez E P¹  | Dandub Palzor Negi²  | Senthil Kumar A P³ | Kaini A²

¹Department of Social Sciences, Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

²Department of Social Work, Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer, India

³Department of Social Work, University of Jigjiga, Somali Region, Ethiopia

Correspondence

Abdul Azeez E P, Department of Social Sciences, Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), Tamil Nadu, India-632014.
Email: instinct000@gmail.com

Abstract

Racial discrimination is a common phenomenon against the northeastern people of India on the mainland. They are prejudiced and othered mainly because of their very identity—mongoloid features—and by assuming their Chinese affiliations. The outbreak of COVID-19 has exacerbated discrimination, violence, and othering across the globe. The case of northeasterners living in the mainland of India is not different either. Racial discrimination and the othering experienced by northeasterners have not yet been studied extensively, especially in the context of the pandemic. Against this backdrop, the present paper examines the othering experiences of northeasterners living in Delhi by analysing nineteen qualitative interviews. We also have attempted to unveil their experiences of being othered before the pandemic. The participants were recruited based on inclusion criteria. The findings of the paper underline othering as the everyday experience of northeasterners living in Delhi. The worst forms of othering and discrimination amid the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in stigmatisation and bullying, insecurity and helplessness, and mental and emotional strains are evident in the participants’ experiences. The instances of growing racism in India against northeasterners evidence the stereotypical attitude of the mainstream population towards them and urges legal measures to prevent it.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The issue of discrimination, particularly based on racial identity, is a well-known fact and often less discussed topic in the case of northeast people in India. The people of India’s northeastern states are discriminated based on their racial characteristics (Bora, 2019; Gergan & Smith, 2022). Northeasterners are misrecognised as foreigners from China, Japan, Myanmar, Nepal, or Thailand

(Thounaojam, 2012; Mukherjee & Dutta, 2018). Haokip (2020) argued that northeastern people are subject to differential treatment not because of misrecognition but because they are considered 'lesser Indian' in the mainland. They often face derogatory racial remarks such as 'chinky' (one who belongs to China) and other comments for their mongoloid-like features (McDuie-Ra, 2015; Samson, 2017; & Haiokip, 2020). They are also subject to discrimination and harassment for their culture, such as food habits, skin colour, language, and name. Their epicanthic eye folds, snub noses, and bearing phenotypic traits make them distinctive from the others. Racial othering and violence against them are often reported from different parts of the country. Delhi is most unsafe in this context, and one northeastern person is targeted every alternate day (Singh, 2014). The empirical studies suggest that northeast people living in India's metropolitan cities often have bitter experiences of racism, racial attacks, and discrimination (McDuie-Ra, 2012a, 2012b, 2016).

Northeast Indian states, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, share their border with neighbouring countries such as China, Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. The region is primarily dominated by indigenous people classified as 'Scheduled Tribes' under the Indian Constitution, followed by non-tribals of East and Southeast Asian lineage and other migrants from different states of India and neighbouring countries (McDuie-Ra, 2015; Ziipao, 2020).

The northeast states are culturally distinct from the other states of India. Due to colonial ethnography, historical ideas and narratives formed their identity as a distinct land of people migrating from East and Southeast Asia (Bora, 2019). Instances of racial slurs and attacks on the northeasterners are widely reported (McDuie-Ra, 2013; Sitlhou & Punathil, 2017; Ngaihte & Hanghal, 2017). Northeasterners living in metropolitan cities of India are often subject to exclusion, racism, and violence. They are treated as 'others' in the mainland of the country. We have used othering as a theoretical lens to understand how northeasterners as a group are othered and subjected to multiple discrimination. Spivak (1985), who was the first scholar to study othering systematically, described othering as a tool used for social differentiation, constructing others as morally inferior and seen as classed and raced. The othering theory drawing on other theories of identity formation assumes that 'others' are always relegated to an inferior position and pushed to the margin. Similarly, Schwalbe et al. (2000, p. 422) propose othering as 'the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group'. Such domination is evident in the case of discrimination against the northeasterners in India. The 'othered' are dehumanised, and remaining in a stereotypical position is evident as a result of othering (Riggins, 1997; Lister, 2004). We have attempted to look at the inferiority, insecurity, and subjugation experiences of northeasterners amid COVID-19 by using 'othering' as a theoretical lens.

As Fine (1994) argued, 'othering' sometimes unintentionally reinforces and reproduces the notion of domination and subordination. Resultantly, the 'othered' groups are subject to various forms of discrimination, vulnerability, marginalisation, and exclusion (Johnson et al., 2004). Powell and Menéndian (2016) argued that 'othering' is the twenty-first century's problem. Othering practices are often influenced by cultural, racial, and language differences (Udah & Singh, 2019).

Racial othering is a common phenomenon against the northeastern people living in Indian cities. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has exacerbated the instances of discrimination, violence, and othering (Debata et al., 2020; Odyuo, 2021). The pandemic has caused an enormous stir in the world, resulting in millions of deaths and fears in people's minds around the globe. There were media reports on racial slurs, attacks, and discrimination against people of the northeast states residing in India's metropolises amid the outbreak of COVID-19 (Jha, 2020; Banerji, 2020; Ibrar, 2020; Chanu & Chakraborty, 2020). They were blamed for bringing and spreading the virus. Racial discrimination and the othering experienced by northeasterners have not yet been studied extensively, especially in the context of the pandemic. Against this backdrop, the present study attempted to explore the othering experiences of northeasterners living in Delhi, India, amid the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also aimed to unveil their experiences before the pandemic.

2 | METHODS

A descriptive qualitative research design guided the present study. We undertook the data collection during June–July 2020. This was a period just after the nationwide lockdown, and COVID-19 cases were widespread in India at the time of the study.

2.1 | Study setting, context, and participants

The study was conducted among the northeastern people living in Delhi, the capital of India. We have chosen Delhi as the setting for the study for two reasons. Firstly, Delhi has a considerable northeastern population. The educational and employment opportunities in Delhi and National Capital Region (NCR) attract northeastern people. Also, various pull factors surge the migrations from northeastern states to other metropolitan cities of India. These include insurgency, lack of employment opportunities, and slow pace of urbanisation. Secondly, racial violence against northeasterners has been rising for many years in Delhi.

The participants of the study were northeastern people living in Delhi. The third author, a northeasterner, was able to connect with some of the potential initial participants for the study. This selection was based on convenient sampling. The participants were briefed about the purpose of the research and asked, ‘Have you faced any exclusion/discrimination being a northeastern person in Delhi during your stay here?’. Only those who replied ‘Yes’ to this question were chosen as study participants. The additional participants were suggested by the initial participants interviewed. Only such people were selected who had been staying in Delhi for 1 year at the time of the study. The rationale of this inclusion criterion was to ensure the participation of respondents who had experienced Delhi before the outbreak of COVID-19 and during the pandemic.

We had located many potential participants who fit the inclusion criteria and contacted them one by one. Code saturation was considered the criterion for determining the number of participants. We could achieve code saturation by interviewing 19 participants, and hence the interviewing process did not continue further.

2.2 | Data collection

A semi-structured interview schedule aided the data collection. The first and third authors conducted the face-to-face interviews. The major crux of the interview question was on the othering experiences of participants while living in Delhi—before and during the COVID-19 phase. The interviews were conducted at the place of the participant’s convenience. Except for two interviews, all the interviews were conducted in English. Two persons were interviewed in the Manipuri language. The interviews lasted 50–70 min. All the interviews were audio recorded.

2.3 | Data analysis and rigor

The interviews conducted in the English language were transcribed verbatim and analysed accordingly. The interviews conducted in the Manipuri language were initially transcribed verbatim and later translated into English. We have employed Burnard’s (1991) 14-stage method for the data analysis. This method is very comprehensive in its analytical framework because of the extensive procedures involved in extracting the themes and ensuring the validity of the analysis.

Burnard’s analysis method ensures the validity of the analysis process through multiple researchers’ involvement in data analysis. Further, the 14 stages of analysis also involve a ‘member check’: The

researchers went back to some of the participants to confirm the accuracy of the categorisation/themes generated regarding the excerpts from their interviews.

2.4 | Ethical considerations

The present study has strictly adhered to ethical considerations for researching human subjects. We took written informed consent from all the participants. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, their rights, benefits, and potential threats before the data collection.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Socio-demographic profile of the participants

The study participants belonged to Arunachal Pradesh (3), Assam (2), Manipur (7), Meghalaya (4), and Nagaland (3) states of Northeast India. Out of 19 participants, 11 lived in Delhi for more than 5 years, and the rest for 2–3 years. Better employment and higher education opportunities attracted most of them to Delhi. At the time of the study, 12 of them were working while seven were students. The participants were between 22 and 33 years of age. Out of 19 participants, 11 were females, and eight were males. All the participants were living in rented apartments. Four of the participants were married, and others were single during the study.

3.2 | Othering experiences: before and during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought an unprecedented change in the lives of millions of people across the world. Besides posing a severe challenge to healthcare and economy, there were instances of racial attacks and discrimination against certain sections amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Addo, 2020; Devakumar et al. 2020; Roberto et al., 2020; Yearby & Mohapatra, 2020; Xu et al., 2021; Guo & Guo, 2021) The case of the northeastern people of India living in the mainland was not different either. The data analysis has resulted in five themes that carry the experiences of northeastern people. The first theme portrays their othering experience before the COVID-19 pandemic, and other themes depict their experiences amid the pandemic.

3.3 | Othering as everyday phenomenon in Delhi

People from the northeast states of the country migrate to the other states, particularly to metropolises, for better opportunities such as pursuing higher studies and looking for jobs or because of marriage. It is well documented that people from the northeast states face racial discrimination when they move from their states and settle in other states, particularly in the country's metropolitan cities such as Delhi. It is factual that COVID-19 has exacerbated the instances of exclusion and othering of northeasterners in Delhi. However, this study underlines that othering and maltreatment were prevalent even before the pandemic. The theme, 'othering as everyday phenomenon in Delhi', carries the essence of participants' experience of being othered during their stay at Delhi before the outbreak of COVID-19. All the participants have encountered the experience of othering during their stay.

Reiterating the experience of othering and exclusion, a participant enrolled in the Master's program narrated:

Me and most of my friends from the northeast have experienced discrimination and exclusion since started living in Delhi. One of my classmates in front of the entire class called me ‘chinky’. Even the teacher was present there. Nobody said anything as if it was normal. I have not replied to anything. The situation is not different in public places. People feel disturbed seeing us in groups and start commenting, ‘Delhi is becoming chinkies’ place’. (A Manipuri 26-year-old male)

Another participant living in Delhi for the last 5 years and working in a BPO narrated her experience as follows:

We are not warmly accepted by others here. Indeed, some people treat us well. But many don’t accept us. People are unhappy seeing us. People treat us as foreigners—basically Chinese origin. I hear people commenting on us as less national and immoral. Many feel that we do not have anything of Indian origin—looks, language, and culture. People show their anger towards us whenever possible. I do not know what is wrong with them. (A 27-year-old female from Meghalaya)

The everyday life of northeasterners in Delhi is evident from the above narratives. All the participants have similar instances of othering dominated by dehumanisation and exclusion. The very identifiable physical looks, language, and distinct culture makes them vulnerable in the public spheres of life. Unlike people from other states, northeasterners do not enjoy a sense of togetherness and belongingness with others in Delhi. It is the result of persistent exclusion by the mainstream. Also, using derogatory terms to address northeasterners has become a normalised act. A perceived otherness and fear are manufactured in the country’s capital against northeasterners. Racial hypervisibility manifested through physical characteristics, especially skin complexion and facial features, makes them identifiable to others and subjected to maltreatment—othering. In public spaces, they are being targeted and mistreated by highlighting their very physical nature and arbitrarily assimilating them with the Chinese and people of other countries.

3.4 | Stigmatisation and bullying

The exacerbation of racism and othering is the byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global health crisis has also taken the shape of a racial pandemic due to the escalation of racial discrimination against people of Asian origin globally; especially those with mongoloid features were targeted. In the west, the targets were people of Asian origin, while in India, racial discrimination and slur were against the people of the country’s northeastern states. The pandemic has brought unique challenges to the northeastern people living in the mainland of India. Many people from northeastern states got humiliated publicly. The theme ‘stigmatisation and bullying’ represents the participants’ encounters of stigma, bullying, and prejudice amid the pandemic in Delhi.

Narrating his experience, a 24-year-old male from Manipur working in a restaurant said:

People called and shouted at me as Corona Virus when I went shopping. Even taxi drivers refused to pick me up. A group of young men shouted at me that ‘You people have brought the virus here’.

Blaming and subsequently refusing to accept one’s community as a whole reflects the societal attitude and indifferent behaviour towards culturally distinct communities in their land. Denial to provide public services such as transport shows internalised racism and personally mediated racism. The act of denial denotes an explicit notion of cultural intolerance and insensitivity towards racial or ethnic minorities.

Another girl from Nagaland has recounted her experiences of bullying and stigmatisation:

I was travelling on a shared cab, and two men were about to get into the same cab. By seeing me, they refused to enter and commented that corona is already seated and we will not take this cab. Whenever I used to go outside for groceries, people used to look at us differently and avoid contact, but they are quite normal with others who even did not wear a mask. (A 22-year-old student from Nagaland)

A similar incident was also experienced amid lockdown by one of the respondents, as narrated below:

Racial remarks and racism have become more pronounced after the outbreak of COVID-19. My friends from other northeastern states and I have faced racial slurs such as calling the China virus upfront while going to public places. (A 24-year-old woman from Manipur)

From these lived experiences of respondents, it is evident that racism is more pronounced after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, these incidents project the tyranny of the mainstream and upheaval of the problem of racism. It also reflects the implicit attitude and stereotypes of the mainstream towards the northeast people. The current pandemic has reinforced and aggravated the incidence of racism in the country's capital city. The prevalent notions and perceived beliefs and behaviours of mainstream folks reflect their act of relating particular populations negatively with an infectious disease such as COVID-19. There will be many more such incidents of sheer neglect and misconception and subsequent unfavourable and dehumanising practices of racism.

3.5 | Sense of insecurity and helplessness

The escalation of racial othering amid the pandemic has created confusion, insecurity, and helplessness among the northeasterners studied. The incidence of such varied attitudes and stereotypes from their fellow citizens was a question of their very identity and existence in the city. A sense of insecurity and helplessness depicts the reality of northeasterners' present condition and state of mind amid the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of job loss, racial attacks, being forced to vacate their accommodation, etc. Experiences of such feelings are vivid from the following narratives:

We have been living in a rented apartment for more than 3 years. The landlord has asked us to vacate the house as soon as possible amid lockdown. Despite having good terms with the landlord, we were forced to leave the house. We have been harassed over the suspicion of carrying coronavirus. My roommate and I felt helpless. We request him but in vain.... (A 23-year-old student from Nagaland)

Another man from Manipur described his fear in public places as follows:

I have come across the news of northeasterners being bullied on the ground of suspicion of carrying the coronavirus in many parts of the country. This makes me frightened and insecure about going outside. There is a constant fear in the minds of being victimised for no reason. I felt helpless. There was a feeling of insecurity among northeasterners during the COVID-19 outbreak. Anytime we may be targeted and attacked. (A 25-year-old man from Arunachal Pradesh)

The current pandemic has exaggerated the plight of northeast people living on the mainland. The apparent outcome of racial slurs and attacks streamed in the mainstream media has left fear among northerners. Fear of being attacked has led many northerners to either be confined to their homes or live with a perplexed sense of insecurity. The news of attacks on northerners in various cities has further created panic among them. The sense of being victimised and helpless has significantly impacted their day-to-day lives.

3.6 | Mental and emotional distress

The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent strict measures by the states across the globe to contain its spread have brought mental health issues and uncertainty in the lives of millions of people. The case was not different in India—the 2-month-long nationwide lockdown had impacted people emotionally, socially, and economically. Along with such unprecedented developments, increased racism and attacks in the country's metropolises have further irked northerners' lives. Fear of being assaulted and indifferent treatment by the public is evident from the participants' experiences. Being othered in their homeland has extensive mental health impacts and underlines the darker sides of racism. As narrated by a 32-year-old man from Meghalaya:

COVID-19 and the strange behaviours of people around us forced me to feel stranded. Racial abuse, verbally, if not physically, is much more common. While visiting my friends in the neighbourhood, I was asked to get tested for COVID-19 for no reason. This kind of outrageous behaviour is mentally harassing. We are often looked down on as culprits. And it hurts.

A 22-year-old female student from Manipur has narrated her experiences as follows:

I have come here for pursuing higher education. COVID-19 has brought severe changes in the attitude of the people towards us. People often pass derogatory remarks. I felt like leaving Delhi because of the stress. Seeing the news of attacks against northerners in Delhi, my parents and relatives called me every day to ask to take care—'Don't go out and go along with others even if you have to'. We were doing the same even before the pandemic. But during the pandemic, it becomes stressful, and I felt uneasy.

The prevalent cultural insensitivity, biased attitude, and stereotypes towards northeast Indians have roots in the history of systemic racism. Such behaviours inflict physical violence on the victim and exert mental and psychological strains. Racism has bewildering and perennial impacts on the mental and psychological wellbeing of the individual. The shared experiences of such unspoken distress were common among the participants. However, women have experienced more mental and psychological distress than their male counterparts, evident from their shared experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent racial attacks on the people of northeast states exacerbated the emotional and mental stress. Such repetitive and cumulative exposure to physical or verbal racial abuse could be emotionally and psychologically straining and impactful.

3.7 | Social solidarity and state response

Northerners felt 'othered' due to unparalleled instances of violence and bigotry during the pandemic. This made it difficult for many to cope with the prevailing situation. In such a critical time of uncertainty, they banded together and supported each other with all possible means. The sense of sharing the common fate and perceived threat of being othered made them feel united and take a collective

action. This has resulted in talking about racial discrimination in social media. Few of them have taken initiatives to form WhatsApp groups to support each other in difficult circumstances due to COVID-19 and racism. Moreover, a social media campaign *#IamNotCoronaVirus* has been initiated, and the same has got wider social support from the public. As a result, several politicians have denounced the violence directed at northeasterners, and the Ministry of Home Affairs has released a statement on the subject. Such developments, especially people extending support, made many northeasterners feel better and cope up with the situation.

One of the respondents from Manipur narrated his experience of coping with such unexpected instances as follows:

The norms of social distancing as a practice to contain the spread of the virus has put us apart, and I felt lonely. Thanks to social media, due to which we feel connected and together. We share our bitter experiences there in the WhatsApp Group or Facebook. It gives me the courage and strength to deal with psychological stress and remain calm and composed. The WhatsApp group is still active, and we do share our concerns, and I feel supported. (A 30-year-old man from Manipur)

Though a prevalent norm, social distancing as public health measure acted as an impediment to expressing their collective resistance and to demanding the state's interference in the sheer rise of racial attacks in and around the city. However, people have resorted to social media to express their concerns, which stimulated social solidarity among people of the northeast. The participants have expressed a strong sense of social solidarity, which acts as a buffer against the unexpected rise of racial slurs and violence. This social solidarity helps them cope with the psychological and mental strains and bridge the gap between them due to the public health norms of social distancing.

The state's response to the escalation of racism against northeasterners was not felt promising by most participants. A proactive measure by the police and senior officials in stopping such instances was not experienced by most of them. By not doing so, the government and police could not inculcate a feeling of security and safety among the northeasterners in the city. The majority of them expressed their hesitation in reaching out to the police in instances of racial attacks. The reluctance was mainly because of their previous experience with police in similar circumstances.

One of the respondents has reiterated his encounter:

I went to the police station for help as people in my neighbourhoods used to pass derogatory remarks, and the shopkeeper refused to sell essentials. But the person in uniform said to my friend and me that 'it is common do not to get involved in such legal formalities, and things will be all right soon'. (A 26-year-old male from Meghalaya)

Participants of the study experienced the apathy of the police in addressing the instances of racial discrimination. It is a wider construction among the studied participants that approaching police does not make much difference, and they have to be involved unnecessarily in the legal formalities. This manifests the failure of the system to ensure a safe environment for the migrant communities such as northeasterners in Indian cities. The police and law enforcement personnel should be compassionate in addressing issues of racial discrimination.

4 | DISCUSSION

The study's findings underline that racial discrimination and othering are everyday phenomena for northeasterners living in Delhi. The very identity of being northeastern, which is evident in their racial hypervisibility, makes them vulnerable to discrimination and othering. They are subjugated, targeted, and blamed for their physical features, similar to Chinese people. Having physical characteristics

identical to Chinese casts suspicion on them of being anti-national or less national. Also, they are often blamed as immoral. This experience of northerners, evidenced in the present research, parallels previous findings (McDuie-Ra, 2012a; 2012b; Ranjan, 2015). Northerners are identified as outsiders, and the ‘us versus them’ treatment is experienced most in their daily lives. This is evident in the use of languages addressing them as ‘Chinky’. The inherent notion of the mainstream community to keep them away based on their racial identification is vivid.

It is established that racism is different everywhere (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). India is a typical example of one of its kind—often under-discussed but widespread against the northerners. Racial othering is a dominant experience of northerners living in Delhi. In the prominence of the caste debate, racism and racial discrimination often had less attention by India’s scholars and policymakers. The manifestation of othering experienced by northerners has the essence of dominance by the powerful and privileged groups on the less powerful by putting them to the margin and tagging them as being a ‘non-belonging group’. This everyday experience of northerners in Delhi corresponds to the theoretical construct of othering as proposed by Schwalbe (2000) because the discrimination manifests in targeting people identifiable by a group who have the capacity to dominate and make others inferior.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated othering and stigmatisation against northern people living in Delhi. The pandemic has taken racial discrimination into the worst form—violence and bullying. Most of the participants in the study had experienced stigmatisation and bullying amid COVID-19. Such instances of othering and discrimination need to be understood from a global context of racism. Globally, racial discrimination and violence have escalated amid the COVID-19 outbreak—foreign nationals and people of colour were targeted in such instances majorly (Devakumar et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2020; Sandoui, 2020). Remarkably, the Sinophobia element was evident in such instances. People of Chinese origin and appearance constituted most victims (Chan & MonttStrabucchi, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Reny & Barreto, 2020; Mourad, 2020; Ruiz, Horowitz & Tamir, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Khaled & Fayyad, 2020).

In India, the case is not different. The people of the northern part of the country became the victims of racial discrimination. It is evident from the present study that the participants experienced stigmatisation and bullying and were also tagged as carriers of the coronavirus. This result aligns with the escalation of violence and racial discrimination against northerners in the mainland of India amid COVID-19 (Krishnan, 2020; Mohanty, 2020; Kipgen, 2020; Kashyap & Panda, 2020; Colney, 2020; Sirur, 2020; Wilkinson, 2021). As rightly pointed out by Harvey (2020), COVID-19 has the essence of a racial pandemic, as it essentially discriminates racial minorities such as northerners in India.

The escalation of racial discrimination and othering has intensified insecurity and helplessness among the studied participants. There were many reports of northerners being attacked in different cities, especially in Delhi. The mainstream population avoided them in public spheres. Being away from their native place, and living in a place where a very biased attitude prevails for their physical appearance, makes participants feel insecure and helpless without any proper support system. Most of the participants experienced insecurity and helplessness because northerners across the country were accused of spreading the coronavirus. They were attacked, subjected to dehumanising treatment, denied to access public services, and asked to vacate accommodations (Karmakar, 2020; Chakma, 2020; Pandey, 2020; Singh, 2021). Such incidents of othering and discrimination against northerners geared fear and a sense of insecurity. Dehumanising treatment and stereotypical attitude towards a group are essential features of the theoretical construct of othering (Riggins, 1997; Lister, 2004), which is evident from the present study.

Northerners have faced a double burden of insecurity. Firstly, the obvious uncertainty emerging from COVID-19 has impacted people across the spectrum. Secondly, the racial othering exacerbating during COVID-19 has put them on the edge of mental and emotional distress. Globally, many vulnerable populations were victims of these burdens, and Addo (2020) calls this a ‘double pandemic’. The mental health implications of racism are well documented in the currently available literature

(Okazaki, 2009; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). The present study's results are consistent with recent evidence on the effect of COVID-19-related racism on mental health among Asian-Americans (Cheah et al., 2020; Wu, Qian & Wilkes, 2020). The study participants felt the state's response to racism in India is not promising even amid the pandemic. However, social solidarity has emerged to raise their voice and support each other. Collective consciousness and action could arise from such movements among northeasterners, and it has implications for their mental health, safety, and security in the cities. Similar indications of social solidarity against racism are evident in the American context amid the pandemic (Libal & Kashwan, 2020).

The negative effects of discrimination on social wellbeing, quality of life, and other psychosocial aspects are well established (Okazaki, 2009; Ong et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2011). The collective action by the discriminated and othered groups often yield better outcomes. Wright et al. (1990) propose that members engage in collective action to improve the conditions of their group. Engagement in such collective action yields positive wellbeing outcomes (Cocking & Drury, 2004; Foster, 2013, 2014). A study on the specific context of micro-aggression faced by the northeastern people living in Delhi also found that collective action improves social wellbeing and acts as a coping means (Sohi & Singh, 2015).

5 | CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted certain segments of the global population—the northeastern people living in the mainland of India is one of such groups. This study was designed to enquire about their othering experiences before and amid the pandemic in Delhi. This study is the first of its kind, documenting the racial discrimination that prevailed during the COVID-19 outbreak in Delhi from the first-person perspective. The study documents worrisome narratives about othering and discrimination. The Mongoloid features make them 'non-belonging' and outsiders. The experience of othering is an everyday phenomenon for northeasterners living in India. They become accustomed to expecting such toxic behaviours from their fellows on the mainland.

Northeasterners' experience amid COVID-19 is dominated by stigmatisation and bullying, as they are being targeted and arbitrarily accused of spreading the virus. Neglect and avoidance of northeasterners have become more prominent than ever before. The participants also had a strong sense of insecurity and helplessness from the prevailing racial hatred against northeasterners. The racial discrimination and othering have significantly put a toll on the emotional and mental health of the participants. The exacerbation of racial hatred and othering amid the pandemic manifests stereotypical attitudes of the mainstream population.

Our study results suggest that racial discrimination impacts northeasterners' everyday lives. The pandemic has exacerbated the situation and made them 'othered' even more. The failure to accept the prevalence of racism and the non-existence of anti-racism laws in India further worsen the situation. A committee, the Bezbaruah Committee, was appointed by the government of India in 2014 to investigate the discrimination faced by northeasterners in other parts of the country. Most of the recommendations of the committee to prevent racism have not been implemented yet. The government should address the marginalisation and othering of the northeastern population in the mainland. The efforts for collective action initiated by northeasterners amid the pandemic have the potential to prevent discrimination and promote wellbeing. Such measures in a normative manner should be promoted considering their prospects. Future research should focus on large-scale studies documenting the impacts of othering on northeasterners amid the pandemic from various socio-economic and psychological aspects.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

PEER REVIEW

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ORCID

Abdul Azeez EP  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4627-6550>

Dandub Palzor Negi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8858-704X>

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