Stop discrimination and fight the virus

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Coronavirus outbreak (Photo: IANS)
The Coronavirus (also known as Covid-19) pandemic has changed the world in many ways. Of the several implications on humanity, the issues of health concerns and the rapid decline of economy have undoubtedly taken centrestage. And with many countries declaring lockdown due to the outbreak, the International Monetary Fund has said that the global economy is slowing down rapidly and it could be worse than the 2009 recession.

Among others, one lesser talked about issue that has inherent psychological impact is racial or ethnic discrimination. While the virus itself has already given tremendous hardships to humanity, the stigmatization of a certain race or ethnicity is quite unfortunate. Interestingly, racial discrimination is witnessed in the two largest democracies of the world – the United States and India.

President Donald Trump has referred to Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus” and has defended himself saying that it is not a racist phrase. On March 18 during the White House press conference on the pandemic update, Trump said, “It's not racist at all... no, not at all.” In response to a reporter, Trump said he had used the term “because it comes from China.” The White House justified the president's comments by saying that a number of past pandemics had been known by their places of origin or where they were believed to have originated, such as Spanish Flu, West Nile Virus, Zika, and Ebola.

During the same briefing, Trump had also said that the Chinese government at one point blamed American soldiers who visited Wuhan last fall for having caused the virus. A few days earlier on March 14, the US State Department summoned the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, amid anger over Beijing's coronavirus comments.
While Trump has denied that there is any racial inclination, there have been several instances of Asian-Americans being targeted verbally and physically over virus fears. Trump’s position and his inappropriate comments have emboldened some of his associates and supporters, including conservative media persons and Republican leaders despite being advised by the country’s health officials not to use xenophobic or racist terms in describing the virus.

Although not all Asian Americans are necessarily of Chinese descent, the discrimination or stigmatization has affected all minorities of the Mongoloid race in the United States and beyond. In response to the use of “Chinese virus” by Trump, the executive director of WHO’s emergencies programme, Dr. Mike Ryan had rightly said on March 18 that, “Viruses know no borders and they don’t care about your ethnicity, the colour of your skin or how much money you have in the bank.

So it’s really important we be careful in the language we use lest it lead to the profiling of individuals associated with the virus.” India, the world’s largest democracy, has had its own problems of racial discrimination. While it is not a new phenomenon, the spread of Coronavirus has once again flared up the stigmatization of people from the North-eastern region of the country, who mostly belong to the Mongoloid race.

While there is a certain level of tolerance and understanding towards people from the North-east, there are still many from the so-called ‘mainland India’ who have considered people from the North-east region, which is relatively backward both in terms of economy and infrastructure, as outsiders or lesser citizens of the country, either due to ignorance or other discriminatory reasons. Among many other incidents, a woman from the state of Manipur in Northeast India, filed a complaint at a police station in New Delhi on March 22 saying that she was spat on and called “corona” by a man.

Amid the increasing incidents of racial or ethnic stigmatization, especially toward people of the North-east, the Central government has advised states and union territories to take appropriate actions on individuals or groups who engage in discriminatory activities, including racial harassment with regard to Covid-19. But it is not only the two largest democracies that have witnessed discriminatory remarks over the pandemic.

On March 13, Thailand Health Minister, Anutin Charnvirakul, had reportedly said that European tourists pose coronavirus risks to his country. Charnvirakul criticised European tourists for not wearing face masks to protect against the virus and warned Thai people to be careful in dealing with vacationing Europeans or Westerners “who wear dirty clothes and don’t shower.”

The minister made such provocative remarks while fully aware that the country’s tourism industry brings in significant income for the country. While the minister had some good reasons for concern about the safety of the Thai people, his comments were inappropriate and unnecessary. It could have flared up negative sentiments against Westerners, and triggered retaliatory actions from the European countries against Thais and other Asians.

Those leaders and people who have racial segregation on their minds or a discriminatory attitude towards certain sections or groups of people should remind themselves that a disease like Covid-19 has no boundary, race, ethnicity or nationality. Everyone is susceptible to the virus. It is also important to note that there is still no consensus on the cause of the virus, whether it is from animals, which is the initial theory, or human error or deliberate acts of individuals or leaders or governments.

While the world knows that it originates from China, there is also an unsubstantiated theory of the possibility of a deliberate or accidental use of a biological weapon. Regardless, discrimination or segregation should not have a place in this globalized world of interconnectedness and dependence on each other. The world must stand together against the deadly virus rather than stigmatizing each other over the place of origin and or its inhabitants. Collective efforts to fight the virus must be the top priority since the number of infected countries and deaths are surging by the day.
More importantly, everyone should realise that no race or ethnicity is in the majority everywhere. A majority group in one's own country is a minority in another country or land. Racism should have no place in a civilized society.

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