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DOI: [https://doi.org/10.38140/
at.v35i1.6146](https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v35i1.6146)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023

Supp 35:160-179

Date received:

29 March 2022

Date accepted:

2 September 2022

Date published:

26 April 2023

Sexy chinkies in Indian cities: Can we embrace a slant-eyed Mary?

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the escalation of anti-north-eastern racism during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, by analysing the existing and underlying forms of domination faced by north-eastern Indian populations living in the metropolitan cities of India. It particularly investigates the intersectionalities of caste and race, gender, LGBT, and the older form of anti-Chinese sentiment called the yellow-peril myth. It explores Mary Magdalene's life and reflects on the public and cultural narrative, while simultaneously highlighting the lived experiences of north-eastern women in Indian cities. The article compares the experience of Mary Magdalene with that of the indigenous north-eastern women. It asks how Mary, if she were slant-eyed, negotiated the humiliation and discrimination of race and gender, and how the figure of Mary can help challenge the public myth and offer a site of resistance for north-eastern women, many of whom are Christian.

1. INTRODUCING CHINKIES IN INDIA

This article investigates the escalation of anti-north-eastern racism during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, by analysing the existing and underlying forms of domination faced by north-eastern Indian populations living in the metropolitan cities of India. It specifically explores the intersectionalities of sex, gender, race, and caste within the constructs of nationalism.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, many indigenous peoples from the



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north-eastern¹ states, who have East Asian phenotypical features, were discriminated against and faced violence. These isolated cases resonated with global anti-Asian hate crimes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated suffering and violence and revealed racial, gender, and economic inequalities on a global scale. This has also been the experience of north-easterners in metropolitan cities (Chakma 2020). The existing states of violence and racism, borne by narrow constructions of exclusionary nationalism, have worsened. However, the historical oppression against north-easterners is pre-pandemic. Its roots can be traced to the departure of the British colonisers from India that did not result in freedom, but instead was a mere transfer of power from one set of elites to another, in this specific case a dominant caste group that continued to be vested in the logic of purity and pollution and treated everyone who was not considered “dwija” or twice-born as objects to be ruled over. These politics of domination were most severely felt in the ‘frontier’ regions of India that were neither fully amalgamated under the British Empire nor sought unity with the Indian nation. These lands were forcibly brought under the control of the Indian nation by violent means, disrespecting attempts at self-determination and self-rule. Martial law brought people under the control of the Indian state. This was coupled with brutal violence that emerged from both state violence and deep-seated prejudice and racism that perceived indigenous people as less than human. These attitudes were not only those of the soldiers on the ground in the north-eastern states, but also had the tacit and succinct approval of civilians on mainland India. Worst of all, legal and policy provisions were brought into play to legitimise military violence.

The draconian martial law, called the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA), gives special power to the Indian army to act with impunity, violating and abusing human rights in the north-eastern region and Kashmir. AFSPA still exists, treating the north-east as India’s colony, thereby causing social, cultural, political, and economic alienation from India. Contrary to Prime Minister Modi’s claim, in his recent United Nations General Assembly 2021 speech (Chakrabarti 2021), that India is the mother

1 Indigenous peoples in the north-eastern states of India are an ethnic minority in the Indian subcontinent. There are eight north-eastern states, of which Mizoram, Nagaland, and Meghalaya are Christian majority states. Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim have diverse mixed religious and ethnic identities. This article focuses on the indigenous peoples from these north-eastern states, who, while religiously and ethnically distinct, share common phenotypical features. In this paper, both “northeast” as a region and “north-easterners” as peoples will be used to denote the East Asian-looking people or “mongoloid”-looking people as some anthropologists would put it.

of all democracies, martial law has left the region in utter poverty, bereft of educational, health, cultural institutions, or any infrastructure of note. Therefore, many north-easterners have migrated to India's urban centres in search of education and employment. This increase in migration, over the past few decades, has also simultaneously increased incidents of racism. This is perhaps also paralleled globally.

Anti-Asian racism and xenophobia is not new and has existed for a long time, but it took on a specific form post-COVID-19. Historically, racist immigration policies prevented Asians from entering the United States and Canada, like the racist and Islamophobic immigration policies in India. Citizen (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019 and National Register of Citizens (NRC) are Islamophobic and racist laws enacted by the Indian Parliament to prevent Muslims and indigenous people from being full citizens of India and by taking away lands from indigenous peoples (Roluahpuia 2020:1). However, as COVID-19 unfolded, there were blatant racial attacks against East Asians on political and social platforms, and China was scapegoated for spreading the virus. Anti-Chinese sentiments grew globally and in India. The Indian government banned Chinese websites and trade services in India. This anti-Chinese sentiment fed into anti-northeast, the scapegoat of India, who were suspected, like the Chinese, of the corona virus. Mainland Indians could not and did not want to distinguish between the Chinese and the north-easterners, and there were all kinds of physical, verbal, and mental abuse against the north-easterners. Mainland Indians expressed disgust at the sight of north-easterners but would not want the north-east region to be infiltrated by the Chinese. This ambiguous relation of desire and disgust with the north-east, of possessiveness and rejection, was played out even more so at the outbreak of the pandemic.

The Rights and Risks Analysis Group (RRAG) reported 22 cases of racial discrimination and hate crimes in metropolitan cities against north-easterners that occurred between 7 February 2020 and 25 March 2020. These included forceful evictions from apartments; being called "corona" in the streets; some students and assistant teachers and activists were called "corona" on college campuses; one woman was spat in the face and chest area with betel-nut juice from a speeding bike and was called "corona"; some had to undergo forceful 24-hour quarantines with no symptoms or travel history until police intervention prevailed, and others were refused shared transportation, denied entry into apartments and grocery stores, and threatened to leave restaurants, in order to appease other customers (Chakma 2020).

These north-eastern migrants in metropolitan cities are usually students, professionals, those working in unorganised sector jobs, those living there

temporarily for health treatment, and tourists. Of all these categories of people, women in the unorganised sector, who usually come from rural areas and are mostly undereducated, were affected the most (Deori 2016:24). With the joint initiative of the north-eastern government, train services were provided to bring the struggling natives back. While most of the women and men clambered to return home, many women remained. This is not to say that it was less of an ordeal to travel back, but those who remained had so much to lose if they returned home – the uncertainty of getting their jobs back, avoid the prospect of marriage waiting at home, support family financially, and have a better quality of life (Writer 2020). The situation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people was even worse as they grieve having to share toxic homophobic space at home. Some of them have no family support, as they fled from home due to opposition and violence inflicted on them for their gender and sexual identity (Nandeibam 2021:1). Many of them were stranded without adequate food supply.

While, in a few cases, the church came to the aid of north-easterners and migrant workers (Jamir 2021:48,49), racism is deeply embedded, and many north-easterners were left to fend for themselves. In fact, “corona” is a new epithet added to other existing derogatory terms such as “chinky”, “momo”, “ching-chong”, and “Chinese”. As the north-east is perceived as a westernised region, where people usually dress in Western clothing, which is different from the Indian cultural dress, it is easier to target north-eastern women and call them “sexy”, “easy”, “loose”, and “prostitute”. North-easterners face discrimination on a daily basis, but hardly make it to the news.

The next section analyses why mainland Indians would easily discriminate against and inflict violence on north-easterners. Perhaps, this will help one understand the recent hate crimes that occurred during the pandemic. The section explores forms of domination that intersect each other, particularly caste and race, gender, LGBT, and the older form of anti-Chinese sentiment called the yellow-peril myth.

2. ANALYSIS

Many minorities face discrimination, harassment, and violence in India. However, people from the north-east face a different discrimination based on race. While other groups of ‘minorities’ (Adivasi, Dalit, tribals) are discriminated, their nationality is not questioned. This shows not only

the chasm between the “frontier”² and the “heartland” of India, but also how north-easterners with East-Asian looks are alienated in the public imagination (McDuie-Ra 2012:87).

2.1 Caste and race

In India, as a caste-based society, caste cannot be easily removed from the mental landscape of Indians. However, north-easterners have nothing to do with caste. Yet caste pervades in all walks of life in India. Caste has its own distinctive socio-historical structure in India, and it would be a mistake to conflate caste and race (Nigam 2019:119; Gupta 2005:55). To equate caste with race would simply defeat the purpose of annihilation of caste and resistance of grassroots or people’s movements against racism.

As castes operate based on separation into discrete categories, which then fashions multiple hierarchies, the single hierarchy principle of ‘race’ would be quite alien to it. Consequently, caste politics would be imbued with a logic quite different from what obtains in racist politics (Gupta 2005:62).

Therefore, one must recognise that caste and race have different strata of analysis, but to use the racial lens to understand north-eastern oppression alone is not enough in contemporary India. Caste and race intersect at different levels when they are produced materially by discrimination and violence. Yet this article uses race as the primary element in understanding the oppression of north-easterners, particularly women. According to McDuie-Ra (2015:88), north-easterners themselves use race and racism to distinguish their sociocultural difference, how they are differentiated from the mainstream India, and how race defines their experiences in Delhi and other metropolitan cities. Hence, even using racism as the primary determinant against north-easterners, caste-based prejudices are still played out in viewing the “other”, particularly women. There is the complex matrix of how the Indian mainstream depicted gender, sexuality, race, caste, and class in public and private spheres, and how violence was exacerbated during the pandemic.

North-easterners in metropolitan cities are perceived through the lens of both caste and race. They are racially and culturally distinct as is their food culture. In a caste-based society, the notion of purity and pollution is also perpetuated through dietary practices. Therefore, the Indian imagination views north-easterners as a polluted people. Mainland Indians interpret north-easterners as meat eaters and associate them with eating dogs and pork, which is looked down upon, and this is exacerbated by

2 North-east was called frontier, implying political and social exclusion and alienation.

their eating beef. In the curious mind of the dominant caste tradition, the cow is sacred and eating beef is considered polluting.

Attitudes towards the food culture of north-eastern India is aptly demonstrated in an indie film *Axone* (2019) that streamed on Netflix. It reveals how north-easterners are treated and the lengths they go to to cook *Axone*, a fermented soybean delicacy that those who are unfamiliar with it consider it a “smelly” dish. The attempt to cook it for a wedding celebration created havoc between north-eastern tenants and other tenants and landlords, as they are disgusted not only by the smelly food, but also by the underlying notion of pollution seeping through their intimate spaces. These sociocultural caste practices formulate policies to police intimate spaces of the kitchen. In 2005, the Delhi Police took the burden of producing the offensive *Security tips for North-East students/visitors in Delhi*, which recommended what kind of food should be eaten and how it should be cooked (McDuie-Ra 2012:101). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the despised indigenous north-easterners’ food and cultural practices were blamed for the origins and spread of the virus. Kikon (2015:333-335), a Naga anthropologist, also mentions the notions of purity and pollution practised in Indian culinary tradition. There is a kind of desirability for north-eastern cuisine, mostly by tourists, employment services, exploitation of natural resources, and integration into India (Kikon 2015:321; Kakati 2015:115). Consequently, Kikon (2015:321-323) further points out that north-easterners routinely face the notions of citizenship and belonging through dietary practices. She argues that “*akhuni*” (*axone*) (or other food considered polluted) in Delhi city is a form of resistance to discrimination and asserting its claim at the nation’s table.

North-eastern women in the metropolitan cities are more visible and vulnerable. This is also true for north-eastern men who are viewed as “effeminate”, heavy drinkers, dangerous, and violent (McDuie-Ra 2012:97). However, the vast majority of north-eastern migrants are mostly women who work at the forefront in public spaces such as in hospitality, beauty salons, malls, restaurants, and spas.³ The East Asian attributes perceived in north-eastern women are viewed as desirable for the Indian neo-liberal market that promotes diversity and inclusivity. North-eastern women in these spaces are employed and promoted as exotic and international. On the other hand, in the caste-based labour society, dominated castes would not be allowed to work or be employed in dominant caste spaces such as kitchens or in hospitality or spas that involves touching and close contact, unlike north-eastern women. The caste-based labour system

3 Lusome & Bhagat (2020:1138-1139) note that female migration dominates in the country and so do most of the north-eastern states.

allows dominated castes to enter dominant spaces only in toilets (Menon 2019:143-14). These employment tensions could have increased anti-north-east attitudes during the pandemic.

2.2 Gender

While north-easterners are racially viewed as being polluted, women are perceived as sexually available. McDuie-Ra (2012:97) notes that middle-class Indian males come into contact with women mostly in private, through family and friends. However, most of these males would go to public and semi-public spaces to look at women, spaces for a voyeur. McDuie-Ra (2012:97) writes that males view north-eastern women who work in public spheres as desirable sexual bodies. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, north-eastern women, whose bodies were desired, became sites of disgusting incidences such as throwing a water balloon at the north-eastern woman's chest; calling out "corona" and speeding away on a bike; a middle-aged man called a woman "corona" and spat betel-nut juice on her face and chest area.

Not only in public, but also in private spheres, the regulation of women's bodies affects north-eastern women. The dichotomy of purity and pollution of an ideal Indian woman expects her to perform familial duties as a mother, wife, and daughter, to be submissive, in other words, and wear acceptable decent clothing.⁴ In this society, north-eastern women are only accepted as Mother India's daughters to those who conform to national norms such as Mary Kom, Mirabai Chanu, and Lovlina Borgohain, north-eastern women, who won Olympic medals and represented India, while women who oppose the Indian inhumane martial law are considered dissidents. North-eastern women usually socialise with same and other sexes in both private and public spaces and are usually dressed in modern Western clothing, and therefore easily targeted as immoral and sexually available (McDuie-Ra 2012:96); objects of desire that also evoke feelings of disgust and are at once despised. This perception has produced a whole set of practices directed at regulating and controlling their bodies and the spaces they can or should occupy. Delhi Police's offensive *Security tips for North-East students/visitors in Delhi* (2005) pamphlet also includes advice against wearing revealing clothes and suggests avoiding lonely roads (McDuie-Ra 2012:108).

4 Recently, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat remarked that women wearing ripped jeans are the cause of society break. Instead, women should be an exemple in society by covering their bodies (*The Wire* 2021).

2.3 LGBT

In a racist society, hetero-patriarchal norms are constantly stabilised by regulating sexuality; those who transgress it are relegated as “uncivilised”. This affects women and LGBT people. As marginal societies such as north-easterners in metropolitan cities conform to the hetero-patriarchal norms, it affects north-eastern LGBT people even among the community. While, on a broader perspective, the north-easterner is viewed as mysterious, strange, and queer, who does not fit in cultural Indian society, and McDuie-Ra (2012:92) explains that north-easterners themselves use race and experience of racism to distinguish from mainstream India, this does not mean that the north-easterners relegate themselves. North-easterners are considered “chinky” foreigners, border-crossing, transgressors, and even “uncivilised”. The idea of north-east is queer for its transgression in the mentality of mainland Indians.

2.4 Yellow peril

This section specifically explores the anti-Chinese sentiments currently witnessed; it is a fragment of older narratives with different names, one of which is “yellow peril” (Tchen & Yeats 2014:11). Yellow is used as a visual racial signifier in relation to the extension of European colonisation. François Bernier, a French physicist and voyager, published *New division of the earth by the different species or races of man that inhabit it* in 1684. He was the first to group people into “race” or rather the division of the earth based on physical skin colour and physical attributes, particularly of women. Peril, a danger, or a potential threat is recorded in the earliest Christian book *Ancrene Wisse* (early 13th century) in relation to morality. Being tempted or giving into temptation is viewed as good as a mortal wound or sin.

In 1895, German Kaiser Wilhelm II used the word “the yellow peril” to lure other European nations to view Japan as a threat to the Western world, while his ambition was to get hold of China from Japan and Russia. He claimed to have a prophetic dream of a seated Buddha riding on a dragon and storming Europe. He commissioned his dream to be painted and it was called “Peoples of Europe, defend your holiest possession”. The painting depicts archangel Michael leading the Biblical prophecy of Armageddon, with the seated Buddha, on one side, and the archangel Michael along with allegorical feminine figures, each representing European nations, on the other (Tchen & Yeats 2014:12, 13).

Yet the idea of yellow peril seemed to have emerged in about 1425, when the word “peril” was used in relation to Mongols, the non-Christian

heathens as a peril to the Christians in Europe. Mongols from the East as a potential threat is equivalent to have attacked the European world. The yellow peril thus seemed to have signified a spectre of doom (Tchen & Yeats 2014:12-14) to the European colonialist world view.

The yellow peril imagery also perpetuated fantastical tropes in cultural media about the idea of Asian men and women. The Asian man is projected as defiling the innocence of a “pure” White woman (Marchetti 1993:10), while Asian men were also considered impotent, with “feminine” qualities, exotic clothes, as well as languid postures and gestures (Marchetti 1993:35). This is also true of north-eastern men. Cho (2021:6) quotes Horace Greeley, an American journalist, that Chinese are “lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order”. Contradictory ambivalences are also projected on Asian women in Hollywood who are projected as villain seductresses, identified as dragon ladies, geishas as spies and trained assassins, while some were projected as fragile, infantile, docile, and in need of a White saviour. These imagined cultural tropes heighten fantasies of superior-White-sexually moral identity over exotic and perverse East Asians, which impacts on global political discourse (Levent 2018:132, 133; Marchetti 1993). The imaginaries portrayed in Hollywood are also absorbed in Indian minds and project fetishisation of north-eastern women, as also demonstrated in Bollywood and indie movies. North-eastern women are desired as girlfriends, but this would not lead to familial ties.

In comparing the perception of disease in the 19th and 21st centuries, Lynteris (2018:38-45) explains that, in the 19th century, the West observed the diseased yellow peril as relating to the decline of the Qing empire of China. This belief continued to perceive China as the repository of “wildmen”, while modernity instead appeals to spirits and ancestors, and the degeneration of the Chinese as a race. They imagined China as the place of origin of diseases; Chinese bodies and spaces as breeding ground and transmitters, and Chinese culture as catalyst of diseases. In recent times, the diseases were linked to poor hygiene, especially Chinese animal markets and Chinatowns. These spaces were imagined to lead to the emergence and generation of new viruses. Lynteris (2018:52) also notes that the diseases were not simply linked to fear and disgust, but also to perceiving China as an emerging superpower, a political, economic, cultural, and religious peril to the Western world, a potential source of apocalypse, or rather the imagined East consuming the West. These imagined beliefs impacted on the Chinese immigrants and on those individuals considered to be Chinese through policies (Chinese Exclusion Act 1882, Japanese internment camps and immigration reforms), and

harassment. While the yellow-peril narrative may have different origins, stereotypes and impacts in different parts of the world, the common theme is that it is imposed by Western, especially North American fantasies and anxieties over imagined East Asia.

Another relevant stereotype is the model minority myth and perpetual foreigners. The stereotypes of Asians (as monolithic group) as highly competitive, nerdy, less sexual, less animalistic, and even successful are then projected as against anti-Black narratives (Franck 2018:17). Murjani (2014:82) notes that these stereotypes are ingrained, especially among the Asian immigrants in North America, to be a model immigrant who works hard, is successful, and not a problematic minority, creating division among people of colour. This also led “to the missing of Asian American perspective in racial discourse” (Murjani 2014:82, 83). The opposite is found among some north-easterners who, as model minority, fought bravely against the British empire and asserted the notion to be as one with India. Furthermore, the potential threat and model minority trope label the Asians as perpetual foreigners. They are constantly asked about their country’s origin and harassed to return to their country. Chinatowns or Asian spaces and Asian bodies, viewed as closed exclusive communities (this could be true to some extent and could perhaps be a form of defence mechanism and/or community mindset) are a constant form of othering.

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deep-seated yellow-peril prejudice was swiftly revived, blaming the Chinese for the virus and its eating culture as “unhygienic” and “immoral” (Li & Nicholson Jr 2021:6). Church pastors and Christian politicians summoned the revival of the yellow peril under the theme of perceiving the East as anti-Christ (in the United States) and a punishment from God. Kwong (2021) calls this “sanctified Sinophobia”, “a Christian-inspired anti-Chinese hostility”. Christian nationalists and White supremacists perpetuated the anti-Chinese and anti-communist/socialist stereotypes during the pandemic, leading to mass shooting and to an increase in hate crimes against East Asians in the United States, Europe (Kwong 2021; Cho 2021:5), and India. However, India is run by the Hindu fundamentalists party, which views the north-east mainly as a Christian state that is a threat to both their ideology and national security. “Sanctified Sinophobia” in India played out in the context of growing Hindu nationalism that regarded north-easterners not as anti-Christ, but as anti-Hindu.

3. BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This article uses Mary Magdalene's life story in order to understand the complexities of sexual discrimination faced by north-eastern women and to flesh out the meanings of being both a "sinful" woman (which the later traditions depicted her as being) and an ardent disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ.

The article reflects on the public and cultural narrative while simultaneously highlighting the lived experiences of north-eastern women in Indian cities. It also compares the experience of Mary Magdalene with that of the indigenous north-eastern women. It asks how Mary, if she were slant-eyed, negotiated the humiliation and discrimination of race and gender? And how the figure of Mary can help challenge the public imaginary and offer a site of resistance for north-eastern women, many of whom are Christian.

Traditionally, Mary Magdalene has been interpreted as a sinner or a prostitute and a repentant sinner. Hetero-patriarchal theology used Mary to further the idea about God, women, and the world. In doing so, Mary has been equated with Mary, mother of Jesus, and with Mary of Bethany, and even with a demon-possessed woman. Even though the Catholic Church has corrected equating Mary Magdalene with prostitute and a demon-possessed sinner, it has caused hermeneutical wrongs to women for centuries (Jayachitra 2006:100). Jayachitra (2006:101-104) explains that the imperial influence on the canonisation process strengthened Western hetero-patriarchal constructs of gender in church institutions. It was prevalent in the perception of Mary Magdalene and of gnostic texts as heretic. This perception affects not only women at large, but also north-eastern women in the context of seminaries and churches on mainland India. They are suspected of being shallow and sexual, objectified as exotic persons only to be desired as girlfriends but not in marriage alliances, as they would rather prefer marrying into their own castes.

Quero (2006:81) explains that Mary Magdalene was considered to be in a hetero-patriarchal binary. She was either a saint or a prostitute and never anything else. In the gospels, Mary plays a significant role at the resurrection and was given the title "apostle to the apostles" for the good news she bore of Jesus' resurrection. However, she is almost a silent character in other parts of the story. Upon close reading of the gospels, feminist theologians found that female disciples were indeed present along with Jesus and supported financially, but were gradually eclipsed. Mary, on the other hand, who played a significant role in Jesus' ministry, was labelled a sinner, a prostitute, and demon possessed (Ruether 2005:122).

Quero (2006:87) further explains how, if she really was a prostitute, Mary Magdalene's body and sexuality were quickly normalised as a decent body saved by Jesus, a repentant kneeling woman. Mary as a repentant sinner became a model for all women and never a leader with an apostolic responsibility. This is analogous to a colonised Mary, mother of Jesus, who is projected as a docile virgin and the epitome of motherly love and compassion. This is also true in the case of north-eastern women who fit the national narratives and are considered to be India's daughters. Those who deviate from the colonial national narratives become anti-nationalists, dangerous suspects to lure Indian men into sexual conduct.

Mary Magdalene was not perceived as a leader; even Gnostics absorbed her into the male language of leadership, as she was rapidly spiritualised as the wisdom bearer who was intimate with Jesus. This labelling is also experienced in the life of north-eastern women who are desirable as sexual beings and yet disgusted as prostitutes and by the association of East Asian features linked to the corona virus. Contemporary Christians, especially Western Christians, understand the disease or COVID-19 as God's wrath upon non-believers. This is further exacerbated by xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and ableism. However, in the eyes of the Indians, north-easterners are diseased for their threat to pro-Hindu propaganda. North-easterners are not perceived as leaders or even as equals, but rather as "unhygienic", "immoral", and "dangerous".

Perhaps, in such an alienation of the north-easterners, recent re-interpretations of Mary Magdalene in fictions and goddess movements, that inspire not only scholars and feminist theologians but also several other areas, will help resist dominant oppression in India. Eichler-Levine (2011:2-11) observes that knowledge about Mary has constantly been re-constructed over the centuries. Patriarchal hermeneutics, attempts by feminists, and new religious spiritualities have used Mary to further female emancipation and resist patriarchy through re-imagining and re-construction. These interpretations view Mary as equal to Jesus, or as a "friend" or a "confidant", as Jesus' wife, as a co-teacher, as a wisdom figure, or as a bearer of secret truths. To Beavis (2013:151), this side of Mary's humanness and acknowledging Mary as a sacred feminine goddess in feminist theology will bring about transformative change. Perhaps, these alternative imaginings of Mary reflect north-easterners' alternative yet ironical negotiation to be a model minority and to resist and refuse to be perpetual foreigners in India. Although this seems restricting, it is one way of decolonising, by reclaiming and re-constructing one's own identity in the face of forceful alienation and domination. However, reparation is due and, therefore, assertive measures must be put in place to combat racism

and sexualisation of north-eastern women, give proper representation of north-eastern women in media and schoolbooks, give more opportunities to access better education, jobs, and infrastructure.

In recent times, Mary Magdalene has received much attention in fiction, non-fiction, and on websites, particularly of being Jesus' lover, hidden wisdom, a sacred feminine, an alternative leadership model as opposed to the patriarchal hierarchical model. Eichler-Levine (2011:21) explains that perhaps the mysterious and uncovered life of Mary Magdalene's story allures and brings out layers of inspiration that then inspire it to be true. Eichler-Levine (2011:21) points out that,

[t]hroughout my perusals of the imagined Mary Magdalene, from websites to novels to spiritual nonfiction, feeling and a sense of verisimilitude tended to trump facts; at the same time, in the language of conspiracy, getting to hidden facts was also emphasized.

Perhaps this yearning for the truth in Mary Magdalene's story comes from a desire for a better society. Ruether (2005:307) argues that many feminists, who seek a lost feminist alternative, are much of

a symbol of faith in the possibility of a better self and society despite their distortion by systems of domination,

rather than a literal historical era. Perhaps, north-eastern women, in a contemporary India, would desire to be regarded as respected selves and not as sexual beings alone. A justice-oriented action will require policymaking, awareness, recognition, and uplifting north-eastern people.

The name "Mary" has variant forms in the Bible and is acknowledged as a popular name. Mary Magdalene is equalled to other Marys in the Bible. The imagined artworks continued the tradition of equating Mary Magdalene kneeling at the apostolic charge, Mary of Bethany kneeling at the feet of Jesus, and Mary, mother of Jesus, next to her instead of Martha (Beavis 2020:31-34). Beavis asserts that the question is not whether it is Mary Magdalene or Mary of Bethany. It is about "which Mary the iconographic tradition reifies: the abject supplicant or the commissioned apostle?" It is not about which person the tradition speaks of as much as what image is being portrayed? Is it an image of compliance to patriarchy or an image of someone who resists patriarchy to provide a prophetic alternative? "The answer is overwhelmingly the former" (Beavis 2020:36). However, more feminists are re-reading and re-imagining the role of Marys in their artworks, where Mary is not in abject supplication, but an ecstatic Mary running towards Jesus (Beavis 2020:37). Mary has been equated and misappropriated throughout the centuries and, although each story

is unique and must be re-read and re-imagined for emancipation, the question is not “which Mary” but, as Beavis asks, which Mary is reified in our theology? What role of Mary does one support? And perhaps, the ecstatic and assertive Mary will help one encounter Christ at the garden receiving apostolic charge. As Goodwin (2017:1) puts it,

Through a feminist theology's re-interpretation of Mary Magdalene, that is subjectively ‘true’ for women today, she can act as a figurehead for female liberation.

Her role in teaching “secret truths” and her ecstatic emotion at seeing the risen Christ can inspire north-eastern women to oppose hetero-patriarchal racist norms.

The question then is: What can the church do? I write, not as a Roman Catholic, but as a Protestant, as someone who comes and draws from the Baptist tradition, a tradition that is known to be anti-establishment and non-conformist. Yet this same Baptist tradition has also internalised and institutionalised patriarchy. For long, women in the Baptist churches were not ordained, and even though some Baptist churches now ordain women, positions of leadership are not open to them.

But this positing of a binary between Catholics and Protestants is not helpful because it ultimately pits women against each other. It has long been recognised that, while some Protestants ordain women, there is no space for a divine feminine within their theological imagination. Perhaps, a Protestant writing about Mary has some value. On the other hand, while the Catholic Church does not ordain women, there is a place for the divine feminine within its theological imagination. We need to formulate an understanding of the church that transcends these denominational boundaries and instead conceive of a community that is committed to the dismantling of patriarchy. Schussler-Fiorenza (1995:7-8) conceptualises such a community when she speaks of the ‘women’s church’.

Since all Christian churches suffer from the structural evil of patriarchal sexism and racism in various degrees, the church of women as a feminist movement of self-identified women and women-identified men transcends all traditional man-made denominational lines.

Given the patriarchal and deeply racist/casteist nature of the Indian society and the church, perhaps a women’s church movement has a certain emancipatory potential. Yet, as Schussler-Fiorenza reminds one, the women’s church must take the issue of race as seriously as it takes the issue of patriarchy. What is, therefore, required is to account for the

women who lie at the intersection of oppression by race and oppression by patriarchy. This womanist discourse becomes the theological undergirding of a women's church movement, particularly in a context where feminist discourses in the Indian context have been dominated by upper-caste women from "mainland India" who have ignored the struggles of "chinky women", even the so-called "chinky women" who reside in their own urban spaces.

If this is the case, the right question to ask is: What would a women's church movement that takes up the cause of sexy chinkies be like? If one were to take the traditional idea of patriarchy as the control over women's labour, sexuality, and fertility, then this is what exactly speaks to the experience of north-eastern women living in urban spaces in India. They are forced to sell their labour on the market, often doing hard work for exploitative wages; their sexuality is controlled by either the state or society, as in the examples above, both in terms of "moral policing" and sexual harassment. Given their patriarchal set-up, communities in and outside of marriage have very little control over their fertility.

In this sense, a church that learns from, and is led by sexy chinkies would work towards creating migrant centres that can provide a host of legal, social, and cultural services for migrant women from the north-east. This became particularly important in times of COVID when jobs were lost. It can also seek to observe how indigenous perspectives inform and challenge liturgies and religious practices within the churches. North-eastern cultural traits and practices are normalised in the context of urban India, while being culturally sensitive and respectful. It can seek to dismantle hierarchies and learn from those on the margins of society as well as the ideological framework of the Indian state and nationalism.

Most of all, churches can learn from Mary, the many Mary's in scripture who refused to have their labour controlled. And this is the story of Mary and her sister Martha who refused to have their sexuality controlled. And this is the story of the woman (patriarchally identified as Mary Magdalene) who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. Or her fertility controlled. And this is the story of Mary, mother of Jesus.

4. CONCLUSION

This article investigated the plight of women in the north-eastern parts of India and Mary Magdalene in the Bible, and endeavoured to show how women are easily dichotomised as either decent or deviant. There has been hardly any hermeneutic imagination outside of this binary. Not only

is the search for a historical Mary important for exegetical, hermeneutical, and emancipation, but it is also vital to recognise which Mary is reified in our theology and its effects in public discourse and daily lives. Therefore, it becomes important to ask: What does Mary represent? What do north-eastern women represent in the mental landscape of Indians? Like Mary, whose identity is equalled with notions of compliance and servitude, the north-easterner's identity is equalled with a Chinese identity. The idea of yellow peril is absorbed from Western colonial interpretations and is projected against north-eastern women. It is not only unjust to equate Chinese identity, East Asians, and north-easterners with disease, immorality, and danger, but it reinforces a racist, classist, casteist, hetero-patriarchal society.

Many feminist theologians de-bunk historical Mary Magdalene and re-imagine and re-read about her. One finds Mary not as one who is reduced to abject supplication but as one who is hopeful of social reversal for a better society, one who fights the empire, one who questions patriarchal authority, one who transgresses social boundary and gender norms, and one who is at the forefront of resurrection. Perhaps, this is why she was the first to receive an apostolic charge by Jesus. As we embrace this liberated Mary, it is a step towards recognising north-eastern women's predicaments, embracing, emancipating, and taking justice-oriented action.

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Keywords

North-east India

Corona

Feminist

Mary Magdalene

Trefwoorde

Noord-oos Indië

Korona

Feminis

Maria Magdalena