

LIVING WITH COVID-19

There is still a misconception in the North-east that the coronavirus is being brought in mainly by visitors and returnees, even though data points otherwise

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On 7 October, 249 people tested positive for Covid-19 in Manipur, among whom 234 were local residents without travel histories and six were personnel from the Central Armed Police Force. Only nine were visitors or returnees to the state, which is just 3.6 per cent of the total number to have tested positive for the virus on that day. A glance at a week's worth of daily statistics released by the "Covid-19 Common Control Room" of the state's health department reveals a similar pattern of infection.

On the same day, Tripura recorded 275 new cases, Arunachal Pradesh reported 222, Nagaland 53, Meghalaya 128 and Assam 1,184. Sikkim and Mizoram do not provide detailed daily updates. That said, in the North-east, most positive cases are without travel history, which indicates local community transmission of the virus.

On 8 September, eight medical practitioners of the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences at Imphal urged

that the Manipur government declare the virus to be in an early community transmission stage. They claimed that community transmission had begun from 9 August and suggested 11 strict measures to prevent further community spread, with the exception of a lockdown.

There was no response from the government, or perhaps it was reluctant to declare the same due to certain misgivings. This non-declaration has resulted in many assumptions, however. Chief among those is the perception in the general population of the region that coronavirus is brought in and spread by those who travel from outside the North-east, as was the case during the early months of the pandemic.

Coming to the strict screening of returnees and visitors at entry points, every state has its own regulatory mechanism of monitoring and compulsorily testing suspected carriers. In Meghalaya, the vehicular route of entry to capital city Shillong is mainly

through Byrnihat, where testing and all other formalities are done, after making people wait for long durations. In Nagaland, the commercial town of Dimapur is the gateway to most road, rail and air routes, and all necessary procedures are conducted there. In Mizoram, people are mostly checked at Vairengte and Lengpui Airport.

In Manipur also, all air passengers have to undergo a lengthy and stressful entry procedure. After a tedious thermal scanning process at the state's airport, passengers are moved to a designated location for registration of onward destinations. They are then transported to their respective district headquarters at five times the regular fare. Transport by road mainly has two entry points -- Jiribam and Mao -- where data is recorded and from there, further directions are given to the respective district testing centres.

In case of the southern district of Churachandpur, all passengers, both travelling by air and road, are

required to wait at the Circuit House in Bijang for the necessary tests to be conducted. Even if people reached earlier in the day, they are made to wait till 7.30 pm as health practitioners have seemingly deemed it the perfect time to test! Inside the Circuit House compound, there is a makeshift tent with a few benches. After evening sets in, people are left to the mercy of mosquitoes without any provision for repellents. Strict social distancing measures are enforced even to the extent of disallowing purchase of food items.

The enforcement of free testing is stressful for both frontline medical workers and travellers. It barely warrants mention that expenses for the same are being borne by the exchequer. Moreover, this procedure is still being adhered to in the North-east despite the Central government permitting returnees to home quarantine for a few days after thermal scanning at airports.

The mindset of people has not



changed from the early days of the pandemic when travellers from outside brought the virus. It has led to stigmatisation towards all those who travel into the region. Policy makers in state governments of the North-east must also be blamed for propagating such a misconception.

Since the first case of Covid-19 was reported in the region in February, new cases have been steadily and substantially rising. Despite fervent appeals on social media by national leaders, including the President of India, to wear masks, wash hands and maintain social distancing, everyday life in the North-east seems to be far away from the "new normal".

People in the capital cities and towns of the region are still going about life in the pre-pandemic way. Except for returnees and visitors, state and local authorities are unable to enforce health guidelines on the general populace. Only in public and private hospitals and a few local stores are guidelines being followed with threats of not being served otherwise.

One realises that maintaining social distancing among people who live in closely knit communities, where sharing goods is a way of life, is difficult in the North-east. However, as Covid-19 cases are not abating even with a persistent, resource-straining fight from both state governments and the Centre, cooperation and participation of people are essential.

In these times, one's duties as a responsible citizen of the country is the need of the hour. Stressing on duties does not mean curtailing rights and freedoms but highlighting an area that has been long neglected. It is only by following guidelines as a responsible citizen that the country as a whole can reduce the spread of the virus.

In the North-east, efforts should be made to promote and enforce personal hygiene, the wearing of masks and social distancing. The authorities concerned should also seriously reconsider testing all visitors and returnees as current data points to the virus spreading among people without travel histories. (Representational images)

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