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**DEBATING  
RACE IN  
CONTEMPORARY  
INDIA**

Duncan McDuie-Ra



## Debating Race in Contemporary India

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# Debating Race in Contemporary India



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*To Dr Bianca Son Suantak (Mang Khan Cing).  
Hilarious friend and serious scholar who brought light to  
dim places. Rest in peace.*

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# 1

## Introduction: 'Let's Stop Pretending There's No Racism in India'

► *Abstract: Northeast communities – the population/s at the heart of race debates – are introduced and discussed in historical and contemporary contexts. Three initial claims about race debates are made. First, debating race has become more frequent at the national level. Second, the response of politicians has shifted from denial to acknowledgment to the desire to do something about it. Third, racism experienced by Northeast communities is framed as a problem of metropolitan India not of everyday life in the borderland occupied by the Indian armed forces and under a series of extraordinary laws and exceptional governance provisions. Debates are grounded in social, political, and economic changes brought about by migration from the Northeast borderland to metropolitan India, deeper concern about the image of Indian cities, and renewed emphasis on national integration as a solution for separatist tendencies in the Northeast.*

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This is a short book about debating race in contemporary India. A great deal of energy goes into strenuously denying that racism exists in India, or upon recognizing that it may exist, stressing that it is not as bad as in other countries. Yet in recent years there has been an increased willingness to debate race and racism within India. There has been a shift among politicians and the media from denial to acknowledgement and attempts to 'fix' racism. This book does not attempt to prove racism exists in India or make a case for its severity. I posit that racism does exist inasmuch as it is identified by people in their everyday lives, members of certain communities mobilize and protest against racism in particular (as distinct from other forms of discrimination), members of the same communities make decisions about where they will work and live within India based on experiences and perceptions of racism, and various state agencies and politicians have made attempts to ameliorate accusations of racism through public reassurance, legislation, and high-level committees. Evidently there is a powerful feeling of racial discrimination amongst a significant and identifiable – though not uniform – section of the population.

This book is concerned with the experiences of indigenous and tribal communities from the north-east of India and eastern Himalayan borderland (Northeast hereafter). There is a strong sense among Northeast communities that the violence, discrimination, and negative stereotyping they experience – mostly as migrants in metropolitan Indian cities like Delhi, Bangalore, and Hyderabad is the result of their belonging to tribal and indigenous communities rather than simply a symptom of high crime rates and inter-community tensions in a culturally diverse polity. Despite this feeling, members of these communities are constantly asked to prove racism is a factor in their experience of metropolitan India. Proof is not always easy to demonstrate. As Manipuri scholar Yengkhom Jilangamba writes:

How do I prove racism when a young co-passenger on the Delhi Metro plays 'Chinese' sounding music on his mobile, telling his friend that he is providing, 'background music,' sneering and laughing in my direction? And what one cannot retell in the language of evidence becomes difficult to prove. Racism is most often felt, perceived, like an invisible wound, difficult to articulate or recall in the language of the law or evidence. In that sense, everyday forms of racism are more experiential rather than an objectively identifiable situation.<sup>1</sup>

The experiences of Northeast communities do not constitute the only story about racism in contemporary India, but it is their story that

has opened fresh considerations of race, belonging, and national self-understanding. While other communities experience discrimination, communities from the Northeast are the only category of citizens to be construed *at the national level* as a separate racial group with a dubious connection to the rest of the nation – ‘mongoloids’, ‘chinkies’, ‘Chinese’. There are many non-citizens who experience ethnic, national, and even racial discrimination in India ranging from Afghani migrants to African students. However, the treatment of these groups does not raise the same questions around citizenship, nationalism, and belonging as Northeast communities. Indeed as will be seen in later chapters, one of the tactics for addressing racism against Northeast communities is to point out their status as Indian citizens and thus undeserving of poor treatment. Rather than deny racism exists, compare racism in India to other contexts, or prove and vilify the depths of racism. I urge scholars to explore these debates and what they might be saying about India, its cities, its labor markets, its politics, and its borders in the 21st century. This book is intended as a starting point for such explorations.

I make three claims about race debates in India that I believe to be fairly uncontroversial, yet understudied by scholars of South Asia and race and ethnicity in postcolonial Asia. First, debating race and racism has become more frequent at the national level. Debates on race and belonging were characteristic of colonial and postcolonial wrangling over territory, borders, autonomy, and secession in what is now the Northeast. Encounters that exacerbate differences between indigenous/tribal communities and Indians form an important part of the ways India is imagined among various communities in the Northeast, reflected in a popular ontology manifest in local terms (*mayang, vai, dhkar*<sup>2</sup>) and humor and stereotypes of the ‘Indian other’. Indians often point to these terms and stereotypes as evidence of reverse racism in the borderland – a popular counter to the claims of racism by Northeast communities. Incidents and experiences of racism enacted by Indians and the institutions of the Indian state are told and re-told within and between communities in the borderland, in the vernacular press, and make their way into the agendas of civil society organizations and local politicians.<sup>3</sup> Yet attention from the national media, national level politicians and politicians in faraway urban and federal state constituencies, and national activists and advocates – all features of debating race in contemporary India – are a much more recent phenomenon.

Second, the response of politicians has shifted from denial to acknowledgment – both tacit and passionate – of the existence of racism experienced by Northeast communities and the need to do something about it. ‘Fixing’ racism, the focus of chapter 4, has become a national project. And this has brought with it the attention of national politicians such as the Prime Minister and Home Minister among others.

Third, racism has travelled from the frontier to metropolitan India, from the borderland to the center, from the vernacular press to the largest circulating daily newspapers and prime time news television. Debates are being staged in, and transmitted from, metropolitan India, and the problem of racism and the measures to fix it are concentrated on metropolitan India. Racism experienced by Northeast communities is framed as a problem of Indian cities not of everyday life in the borderland occupied by the Indian armed forces and under a series of extraordinary laws and exceptional governance provisions. To put it another way, racism ‘happens’ to Northeast communities when they leave home, not at home. Suffice to say this is a troubling shift. As race debates focus on fixing racism in metropolitan India, the borderland itself – and the violence of state-making that triggers migration into Indian cities and increased encounters at the heart of race debates – fades further into the opaque and mysterious workings of parallel governance and extraordinary laws.<sup>4</sup>

These debates will be explored through four cases taking place between 2012 and 2014: three murders – Loitam Richard, Reingamphi Awungshi, Nido Tania, and the mass return migration of Northeast communities from metropolitan cities back home at the fear of racist attacks. These cases are not the first incidents to raise racism at the national level, nor are they the only incidents during this timeframe, however, they represent key moments in the shifts from denial of racism, to acknowledgement, to repair. They are also cases that invited sustained media attention and built momentum, so that by the time of Nido Tania’s murder in early 2014 the declaration of ‘enough racism, enough’<sup>5</sup> could be heard from activists, in the media, and by politicians. In exploring these debates I am less interested in explaining the causes of racism, and though some discussion of causality is unavoidable I will attempt to limit this to how those experiencing racism and those charged with ‘fixing’ it seek to explain it. Nor am I particularly interested in seeking to catalog which acts, statements, and practices should be considered racist and which should not – though much effort is expended on this by law enforcement, media commentators, and politicians in the wake of race

debates and will form part of the analysis of proposed reforms to the law, law enforcement, and governance.

## Northeast communities as racial subjects

In this book I focus on debating race following incidents of violence and discrimination experienced by indigenous and tribal communities from the Northeast borderland. For those unfamiliar with the South Asian context, these communities require a brief introduction. Northeast India shares over 90% of its borders with other countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China and Nepal. There are eight federal states in the region, within which are several autonomous territories. The eight states are: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, though Sikkim has only been included in the administration of the Northeast since 2002. Armed struggles against India have taken place in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland in the decades since Indian Independence in 1947.<sup>6</sup> There have also been sporadic inter-ethnic and anti-state movements in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, particularly since the 1990s. Other states have had more sporadic anti-India movements and inter-ethnic clashes. Inter-ethnic violence has become more common in the last two decades, in part responding to the tactics of the Indian Government in dealing with the region and in part responding to what Willem van Schendel refers to as the proliferation of an 'exclusionary politics of belonging'.<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to make any definitive statement about communities from the Northeast without provoking disgruntlement from scholars eager to identify glaring exceptions applying to one group or another or to point out that violence between communities nullifies any attempt at heuristic coherence. This is understandable to a degree. It is a sensitive and contentious region, both for the Indian state and for the communities living within and originating from the borderland. One does not want to endorse the administrative category 'Northeast India' created by the Indian state to control the border region and the various institutional arrangements and laws that reproduce this category, however, it needs to be acknowledged that the category Northeast is used throughout India and in the borderland itself to identify territory, communities, and a gap between 'mainstream' India and 'its Northeast'.<sup>8</sup> In race debates these communities are ascribed a racialized identity pinned to the borderland.