



## BOOK REVIEW

# Duncan McDuie-Ra (2015). *Debating Race in Contemporary India*. Palgrave Macmillan.

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The work *Debating race in contemporary India* by Duncan McDuie-Ra, is predominantly concerned with the discrimination faced by people from northeast India, in both the mainland and within the northeastern region. Published a few years ago, it has not lost its relevance today. Over the course of the book, the author uses multiple case studies such as portrayals of northeast Indian people in media—movies, news, and books, and incidents of violence—that have taken place against them in multiple metropolitan cities in mainland India to highlight the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination that is a common experience for this racial group. The narrative is constructed to explain how the Indian Government's stance on racism moved from its complete denial to acceptance, due to the repeated incidents of violence. This change in stance was accompanied by the development of policy formulation to protect the racial minority. The author examines and explains the suggestions of the policy committee. He, however, maintains that India has multiple racial groups and focusing policy on the experiences of only the northeasterners privileges their experience at the exclusion of other racial groups. In conclusion, the author states that the present view on discrimination remains incomplete as racism is looked at as an experience that occurs within the mainland and not the northeast, even when ample evidence suggests the opposite.

Four incidents of discrimination between 2012 and 2014 are used to explain the change in the Indian Government's stance on racism. The author then, contrasts the differences in the narratives around racism in metropolitan India and its ignorance in the militarised Northeastern region. The book does not attempt to theorise causality or the effects of racism but does a remarkable job of providing a context to debates around racism against northeast Indians.

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The author acknowledges that the categorisation of northeast Indians into one homogeneous group is problematic. However, he justifies the usage of the term by claiming that northeasterners ascribe to these racial identities, stating, “race debates concerning Northeast communities have been driven by their treatment in metropolitan India, far from the intricate dynamics of localised linguistic, ethnic and tribal identities” (p. 6). Thereby, contesting that the understanding of racism in the Indian context is conflicted between the emic and etic conceptualizations. The emic idea conceptualizes that physical and cultural differences change over time and are more fluid for the society in question. The author contends that the etic concepts of universality of race and racism are being used to understand the emic ideas when it comes to the northeasterners experiences. This conflicted conceptualization makes it easy to deny the existence of discrimination as the northeasterners traditionally conceptualize race difference in emic ways.

The book consists of 5 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces discrimination in India against northeasterners in metropolitan India and the northeastern region. The author uses Elizabeth Kolsky’s conceptualisation, referring to the northeast as the mongoloid fringe—based on their physical characteristics and location. Numerous examples from movies, media portrayals, and news debates are used to elucidate the conversations surrounding racism in India—“the casting of Northeast actors in roles that depict their communities and homelands is limited to supporting roles” (p. 16) The author argues that the northeast is seen as the “other” even though there have been attempts to make the northeastern region feel like a part of India.

In Chapter 2, the author assesses two incidents of racial discrimination in 2012 in Bangalore. The choice of Bangalore as a case study is important as the author wants to assert that discrimination against the northeast Indians is not limited to Delhi, as is often assumed. While discussing the two incidents, the author points out the ignorance of the police and the politicians toward the issues faced by the northeast Indians. Following this, he assesses the mass exodus that occurred within the same year. The exodus was a result of multiple incidents of violence that occurred against northeast Indians. The author’s evaluation of the phenomenon is that the exodus was a major reason that marked a shift in the Indian Government’s behaviour towards northeast Indians, as these cases of racism hurt the “global city” image of the metropolitan areas and led to a reduction in the labour force. However, in debates conducted by news agencies, there was still a general denial of racism, “Politicians and high-ranking police were also quick to dismiss race from the scenario” (p. 42).

Chapter 3 analyses two incidents that occurred in Delhi in 2013 and 2014. The author contends that the murder of a female, Reingamphi Awungshi represented similar failings of the police and political brass. They explain how the stereotype of northeast women being sexually promiscuous negatively affected a thorough investigation pointing out that “gender complicates race debates for a society fixated with morality” (p. 56).

According to the author, the most significant shift in race debates started after the death of Nido Tania, who was beaten up twice in broad daylight, leading to his death. The reaction of the police was unfortunate once again and fit their general

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tendency to ignore the pleas of the northeast Indians. However, this incident provoked protests on the streets, on social media, electronic and print media at a scale not seen earlier.

The author claims that the case of Nido Tania received more attention due to many factors. First, the victim was the son of a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Arunachal Pradesh, meaning that there was a higher level of political power associated with this incident. Second, a national election campaign was ongoing, and posturing from the politicians was necessary, which meant that they used this incident. Third, Nido Tania belonged to Arunachal Pradesh, which demanded intervention from the political heavyweights as the state is considered the best-integrated state compared to any other northeastern state. The claim that it is best integrated is based on the fact that the primary language spoken in the state is Hindi, and the most followed religion is Hinduism. Therefore, the incident against Nido Tania from Arunachal Pradesh represented the failure in state-building because it showed that discriminatory tendencies held by Indians living in the mainland are race-based even when the individual belonged to a higher political class and was from a highly integrated state. The debate around racism shifted after the incident, from denial to acceptance—"Politicians and police publically admitted to racism and prepared to 'fix' it, competing to be the harbingers of tolerance and national unity" (p. 42). At this point, a reason cited for discrimination in news media was the infrastructural underdevelopment of the northeastern region.

Chapter 4 examined the new policy proposed to fix racism by the Bezbaruah committee. The committee suggested multiple reformations such as hotline numbers, fast track courts, a northeast special police unit, promoting northeast history in education, and using racist terms as criminal offences under the Indian penal code. The author is largely supportive of the suggestions, stating that, "the report is nuanced in its understanding of how race is experienced and in showing awareness of counter arguments likely to be raised. It goes beyond simplistic integration and mutual recognition narratives and makes several surprisingly pointed criticisms of Indian society, governance, and law enforcement" (p. 85).

However, the author also argues that this attempt to fix racism is to protect the image of Indian cities as "global spaces". The author claims that this law privileges the discrimination faced by the northeasterners but does not explain which other groups may require similar interventions or what they mean by privilege in this context. While accepting that the promotion of the northeast and building awareness of its present and history is essential, the author raises pertinent questions concerning "what" parts of history will be promoted and who will make these decisions as the northeastern region has had its fair share of anti-India insurgencies.

Chapter 5 is an overview of the changes in the discussion around racial discrimination in India. The author points out two essential themes that have emerged from the measures taken by the Government of India. One, racism is considered a phenomenon that needs to be fixed in metropolitan India and marginalises the borderland. Two, these attempts to fix racism have been made as the Government of India wants the "idea of India to remain inviolable" (p. 108).

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However, with the present measures that have been undertaken, fixing racism is possible only in the metropolitan areas and not the borderland. To elucidate this idea, the author highlights the example of an insurgent-ridden area called Ukhurul, Nagaland. Individuals from the district leave due to its unruly condition and migrate to the metropolitan cities for their livelihood. The author contends that the present attempt to fix racism will only impact their lives in the cities and ignore the issues faced in their homes, stating:

Ukhurul illustrates the dramatic contrast between life in the borderland and life for many Northeast migrants living in metropolitan India. A significant proportion of the population leaves the town for years at a time to live in India [...] Many of them likely face racist taunts, discrimination in housing and at work, and few prospects of any traction with the police. The measures designed to fix racism will address some of these things, but only in the parts of their lives lived in metropolitan cities, and only if the laws are actually enforced [...] the state-making project in the borderland is not complete and that the idea of India is contested—even in the context of a large outflow of migrants to Indian cities, and their return. (p. 109)

The book is an essential text in bringing out the transformations that have taken place in the debates surrounding racism in India. It brings forth the positive changes in view of the policymakers concerning the northeasterners negative experiences while also criticising the lack of focus on discrimination occurring within the northeastern region.