Reconsider India’s North-East in National Curriculum
Binod Bhattarai
Lecturer in Sociology
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Sikkim Manipal University, 5th Mile, Tadong, Gangtok, Sikkim, India

Abstract: In the wake of repeated attacks on the people from Northeast region in other parts of India, there is an urgency to include the syllabus of history, geography, tradition and culture of the indigenous people of northeastern states of India in national curriculum. This inclusion will do little, if nothing, to curb racism in the country.

Keywords: North-East, Racial Attack, Discrimination, National Curriculum, Racism

I. Introduction

In the recent times there has been increasing racial attacks to the people of the North East Region (NER) in the major cities of India which has made front-page, for instance the attack which lead to the death of Nido Taniam, a nineteen year old student from Arunachal Pradesh, the mysterious death of Loitam Richard in Bangalore, the murder of Ramchanphy Hongray in New Delhi, the suicide of Dana Sangma in Amity University and many more addendum incidents remind us the insecurities of the people of Northeast region of India in their own country. The incident of racial violence, constant racial slurs and discrimination against the people of north-east are not new. For northeasters, who look in a particular manner, everyday living in Indian cities can be an arduous experience. Be it in getting admission in a college to taking public transport, from finding accommodation to listening to landlord’s taunts, the verbal abuse on the streets and the snide remarks of colleagues, friends, teachers or the more extreme experiences of physical and sexual assaults. It is often a never-ending outlandish, a story of repetitive experience. These cases further strengthen the growing concerns over the safety and anxiety of the people from NER in almost all the cities and others places in India.

Insurgency and violence have marked life in the north-east for many years and the states have been unable to share the fruits of India's economic growth. The constant struggle between the insurgent groups and security personals has adversely affected the people's way of life. Younger generations find it safer to leave their hometowns and head to the big cities of Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi in search of better livelihood options and education. But their departure to bigger cities are often very humiliating and it only marks the start of their struggle. Parents in the north-eastern states are now apprehensive about sending their children to the big metros for education or employment in view of the recent attacks. Such attacks have once again exposed the deep racial hatred that some people harbor against those who come from the north-east region of the country.

II. Why is it so?

These discriminatory and incessant attacks on the people of northeast (the other Indian) by the Indians have to be understood from the standpoint of non-existent cultural and historical knowledge on the part of the later of the people from North Eastern Region (NERs). Sixty six years has passed since India attend it freedom from the British, with contribution of the northeast people in the freedom struggle; who can forget the last Indian National Army (INA) war against the colonialist British Empire at Moirang, Manipur. Despite which the history of this ‘other Indian’ seems to be missing from the history of 45 million inhabiting this country. Mainly, we are not taught to learn about them, which is vividly exemplified from the missing syllabus in the school textbooks. Northeast India is home to over 272 ethnic groups and communities. However, there is no collective writing, publication or inclusion of its varied histories in the syllabus or the text books of the country’s schools and universities. This ignorance or lack of awareness is one of the major causes of the wrong perception about people from the region. This is one of the main reasons that people of the northeast region faced discrimination when they travel for study and work to different parts of India. It is disheartening that many students from major cities of India like Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi do not even know the northeastern part of India and thus form an alien concept in their mind about the people of Northeast region. Understanding and noticing these major lacunae, there is an urgent need to educate the mainland Indian about the culture and history of the Northeast, thus raising the need for an inclusive syllabus in both school and college curriculums.
III. School Curriculum
Cable television and internet might have replaced many of the books for the younger generation, nonetheless, school text books still remain the primary source with which most children grows up learning. And the curriculum is woefully incomplete when it comes to projecting what makes up India. History is always written by the victor who decides which aspects of the vanquished history suit his greater plans and which bits are best left untold. The same has held true for the history taught in schools in India. The curriculum is excruciatingly North India-centric, so much so that even though students learn by rote the names of all those who made it emperor in the Slave Dynasty, ask them about what the northeast was up to in the meantime and they draw a blank. It is accepted that prior to the advent of the East India Company, there was no concept called India, but the school text books are not of that vintage and should have been compiled to tell stories from all parts of what is now India so that a connect was established early enough in life. The history we study in school is actually the composite histories of the areas which came together to form the Union of India in 1947 and later. Well, that should have been how things were, but that is not the case. The focus is too limited to the areas which were on the ascendant in the 19th century and beyond. Take a close look at the number of MPs each state has and the number of pages devoted to those areas in books teaching Indian History will be directly proportional to that number. But that’s not history. The blind-spotting of areas that got cut off with partition is even worse. The Muslim League for example was a part of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the demand for creation of Pakistan came much after the movement had progressed. We, however, read very little of the role played by this group. Icons like Subhas Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh too are glossed over. But that’s another debate.

IV. How people are discriminated?
There are many instances when the people of Northeast approach someone, they will be asked if they are from Burma or China. Not even that there were many instances when Mary Kom walks in the streets of Delhi with her fellow north-eastern athletes, they were taunted with the gibberish remarks of ‘chinki’ [5], and China doll. Even the Amitabh Bachchan tweet [6] to Mary Kom as being from Assam (a mistake, later apologized), but can he really be faulted for not knowing his Assam from his Manipur? In a Television interview, the veteran actor Danny Denzongpa says “To feel alienated in your own homeland is the saddest thing” he reminded his student days when he was at the Film and Television Institute of India. He further says “That was the worst time for me. I dreaded stepping out of the campus because people would stare and jibes like ‘Gorkha’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Nepalese’ and ‘chinki’ were openly thrown at me. I lived through hell” [7]. These silly statements and remarks are really embarrassing for the people of Northeastern region. Such ignorance is being construed as an insult to the people of the northeast. It renders the state polemics of unity into a hollow rhetoric founded on the basis of ignorance, incompetency and territorial obsession. It is true that people living in one part of the country sometimes are totally unaware of other parts and giving the vastness of India; this is a natural thought process to have ignorance and false beliefs about other parts of the same country. We need to seriously note that there is encapsulation of the notion of cultural otherness by the dominant ‘others’ who incorporate it into the policy of discrimination and dominance. This tendency disturbs status quo and collective growth. It plays off plurality. It exasperates social relation and contributes towards the vicious cycle of assertions and counter-assertions centered on the sense of alienation and the idea of recovery from the presumed subjection. How do we overcome ignorance and incompetency to defend plurality? Anyone who believes in ‘unity in diversity’ has to seriously think about it. There cannot be unity when there is discrimination.

V. Media Responses
Media projections dominantly enounce the northeast as the ‘sick man’ of India. Its contribution in the fields of sports, culture, defense service, resources and politics is not adequately conveyed to the media consumers. Their democratic assertions against the backdrop social discrimination by the mainland Indians, economic exploitation and deprivation in the name of development and suppression of democratic rights in the name of national security are not being properly addressed. There is no coverage of any mainstream newspaper or so called News channels covering Gangtok, Itanagar, or Aizwal, leave smaller regions. They do not care what is happening there. This neglect of the region by the media has resulted in the average Indian citizens languishing in ignorance about the northeast.

VI. Role of History
Before progressing further it is important to make clear why we study history at all. The main reason is to get a better understanding of where we belong - where we fit into the larger scheme of things. There has been much talk about making Northeast join the mainstream which is why it is not enough to just study its history in schools in Northeastern states of India. Northeast needs to figure in the history books studied elsewhere in the country. In junior school, students learn of what Confucius meant to China even before they are taught when and how northeast joined India. Ask a child, even in Northeast, which dynasty ruled in their respective states.
and chances are that you will get the wrong answer. One is not suggesting going parochial here, but northeast does have a history that is worth learning. Few dynasties like Ahom dynasty (Gaith 1906[^8]) in Assam, Namgyal dynasty (Basnet 1974[^9]) in Sikkim, have ruled in North-East more than even the Mughals in Indian History. The British rule which hogs the history books lasted less than a hundred years and stretched 200 years if we include the East India Company’s presence on Indian shores. Well, it will remain so till some serious study is conducted on it. It might not be out of place to even suggest here that the Northeastern states should prepare at least two chapters on its history to fit into text books for schools all over the country and take it to the Centre for whetting by the text book boards for inclusion in the syllabi. In fact this is something that all Northeastern States should do. The recent string of events might even pave the way for these chapters to get included in the national curriculum and this could be the one silver lining that the nation draws from the episode.

**VII. The Way Forward**

Apart from these there is an urgent need for the national institutions like Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) to support, undertake, expedite or strengthen research into and the writing of Northeast history texts for different levels of learning and scholarship. It should give full support on all matters concerning the North east region of India. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) should work with the Northeast historians and scholars and resource person group to make Northeast history include in School Curriculum. National Publishers like National Book Trust (NBT) should give their commitment and to call for authors to write stories and books on the Northeast for Nationwide publication.

The death of Nido Taniam is possibly a turning point for understanding the socio-cultural identities of the people from North-east and the nuances that make them as Indian as anyone else can claim to be. Thus it becomes evident, that if a long term solution has to be brought in then efforts has to be made, to spread awareness towards the wider mass, decrease the cultural gaps and make consistent efforts to propagate a culture of tolerance and peace among the people. An initial entry point could be made by bringing forth changes in the educational curriculum like including like including cultural and moral aspects in it. Students should be made aware of history, cultures and even geography of the North-east. Efforts to make student understand the devastating consequences of racism can also go a long way in solving the problem. Making them realize that the ‘jokes’ or terms they use to describe North-eastern people is ‘not fun’. It is actually an abuse. Determined attempts needs to be made to make the citizens aware of the positive contributions and the common histories shared by people from different racial groups should be made. A fundamental aspect is also teaching the student to question. Rather than believing the propagated ‘myths’ the students should question them, their individual beliefs and see if they are racial may also serve fruitful for the purpose.

**References**

5. Excerpts of Mary Kom profile from *Intelligent Life Magazine* by Rahul Bhattacharya August 2012.