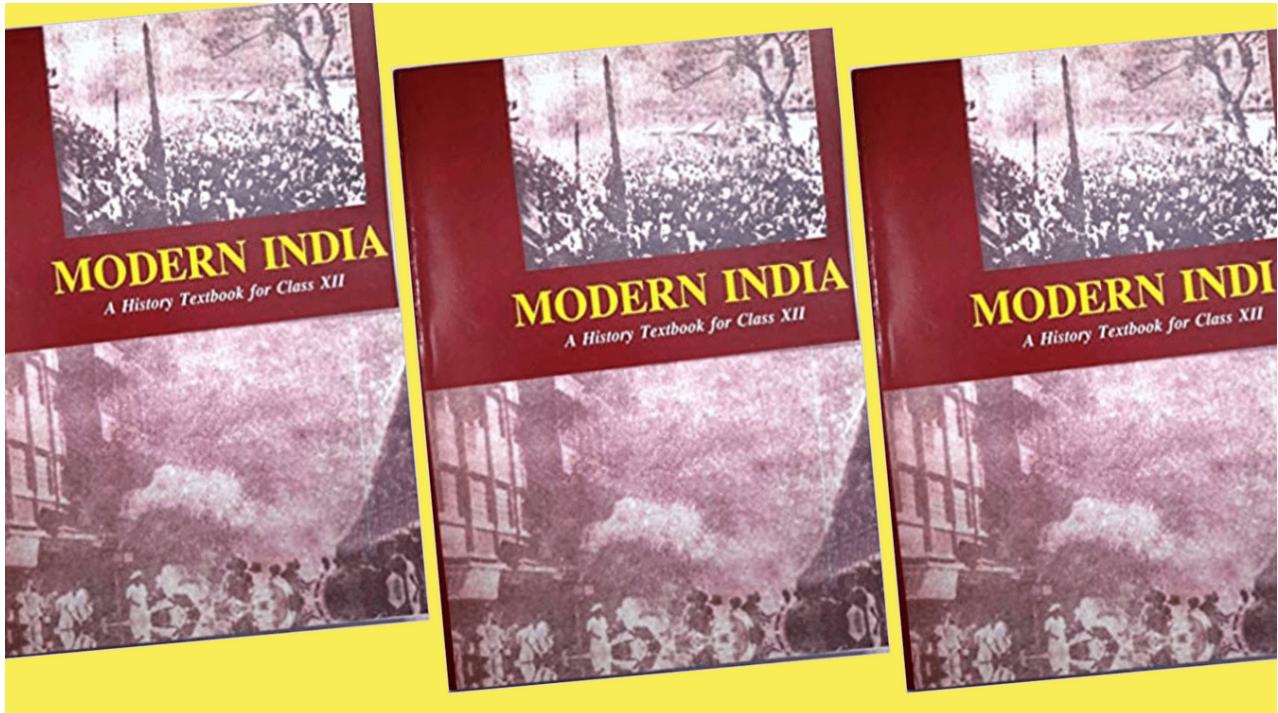


What They (Don't) Write About Northeast India in School Textbooks

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In India, academic discourse on how school textbooks can shape the ‘national identity’ of different social groups is notably absent. Identity formation, as designed by nationalised school textbooks, privileges one identity over the other. This, in turn, affects the dynamics of race relations – as it has between India’s mainland population and the people of Northeast India, forcing the latter to become victims of racism in their own homeland.

The idea of national identity is deeply embedded in what is taught in schools and colleges in countries across the world, where states and their machinery enforce singular ideas of ‘nation’.

National identity and education

Europe has had an illustrious history of imposing a cohesive idea of nation through education. For example, in France, sociologist Emile Durkheim in his theories argued that education can socialise children into following a common way of living and develop a sense of devotion to the collective spirit as a moral national cohesive unit.

Similarly, structuralist Marxist Louis Pierre Althusser identified education as a powerful ideological state apparatus which plays a key role in disseminating the ruling ideology among its citizens. The recent works of Michael Apple, on the politics of national curriculum, illustrates how neo-conservatives in the US attempted to impart through education what are identified as traditional virtues – patriotism, honesty, moral character, and entrepreneurial spirit.

In the UK, the national curriculum system gained much prominence during Margaret Thatcher's regime, which also promoted education as a means to unify the nation.

Forgotten heroes of Northeast India

Among other disciplines, history textbooks play a key role in making students understand the idea of a nation as the subject effectively communicates the narrative of a shared group memory: a collective identity, a common historical territory, common myths of origin and symbols.

In India, history textbooks prepared by eminent historians are well received, yet they are heavily in the favour of the ruling dynasties, actively projecting two-nation theory bolstered by the idea of a hierarchical duality of the 'Hindu majority' vs the 'Muslim minority'. Such a parochial projection of Indian history defies the existence of several other communities from its grand textual narratives, while developing different national imaginaries among various groups. Communities whose socio-cultural histories are represented in these grand narratives identify themselves with the larger nationalism, enjoy all the citizenship entitlements. Meanwhile, the histories of marginalising social groups are excluded from such narratives.

The dominant historiography of India also focuses on its narrative of Indian nationalism, constantly linking it with anti-colonial movements. For example, the 'Modern India' history school textbook describes the 1857 revolt as India's first war of independence where millions of Indians fought heroically against the British, leaving behind a legacy of a glorious chapter in India's history. The textbook wilfully ignores the heroic sacrifices made by the people from Northeast India – Gomdhar Konwar, the Ahom prince of Assam; Kiang Nongbah from Meghalaya; Major Paona Brajabashi, the heroic soldier and martyr from Manipur kingdom are few names to cite.

Also read: *School Textbooks Need to Teach the Constitution, Not Sing the Government's Praises*

In a *New York Times* article, '[The Manipur Massacre: Blame Put Upon the Government: Despatches Held Back](#)', published on May 16, 1891, the author described the incidence of the public execution of the five top British officials in Manipur and how the incident was followed by the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 — [the last Indo-British war in the Indian subcontinent](#). In the war, the Manipuris, under the heroic leadership of Major Paona Brajabashi, were crushed. After the war, the Marquis of Lansdowne, Viceroy of India publicly hanged the Commander in Chief of the Manipuri Army, Bir Tikendrajit and General Thangal on August 13, 1891 while Jubraj and Prince Angou Sana were transported for life.

On June 23, 1891, the *New York Times* reported the [Anglo-Manipur conflict war](#) as a serious war fought on Indian soil, creating a series of painful setbacks among British officials which resulted in the resignation of Sir J.E Gorst, the Under Secretary of the India Office.

The Anglo-Manipur War was an important historical event with worldwide recognition. It's appalling that our history textbooks only mention it in passing and that too while projecting it as border clashes between British India and Burma (Myanmar). India's freedom struggle movement was nobody's absolute monopoly.

Racism against the people of Northeast India

In India, there are nearly 5,000 communities who represent almost every possible racial stock of the world, reflecting a plurality of socio-cultural amalgam. In this cultural matrix, Northeast India constitutes 50% of India's experiential social-cultural diversity – the ethnicity, socio-culture, customs and traditions, language, beliefs and practices, attires, cuisines, and lifestyles with a unique history of about 45 million people. Yet, we are completely invisible in the social-cultural narratives of nationalised school textbooks.

An immediate consequence of this erasure has undermined the identity of Northeast Indians. This systematic erasure suggests a bankruptcy of elitist scholarly practices that serve to validate hegemonic version of what Indian nationalism stands or ought to stand for. Racially, the Mongoloid feature of Northeast Indians has not found a place in the acceptable common imaginary of India – the cultural mould of the Aryan-Dravidian phenotypes. Northeast Indians are mistaken as citizens of East and Southeast Asia. Such misconception of identity has resulted in innumerable instances of racial attacks in the country.

As a result, a lot of Northeast Indians undergo psychological trauma, fear, and often find themselves stuck in uncomfortable situations in their own homeland. There is often moral policing and hatred against Northeast Indians for their 'Un-Indian' lifestyles and Mongoloid features. Horrendous incidents, such as the killing of a young Northeast student Nido Taniam and recent violent racial attacks on Northeast Indians during the COVID-19 pandemic, are chilling reminders.

The exclusion of Northeast India from national textbooks began in the mid-60s when leading historians framed school curriculum as a part of nation building project. The exclusion apparently has accentuated the inequality between 'us' and the 'others' – which can also be statistically verified. The collective intellectual dishonesty and lack of political vision for an inclusive curriculum policy are largely responsible for making Northeast Indians invisible, thereby misconstruing them as aliens. Racism is against the fundamental aspirations of democratic values and ethos of unity in diversity that India often boasts of. This essay calls for immediate acknowledgement of racial antagonism with the attendant academic debates and the discourses needed to end racism against Northeast Indians.

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