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Duncan McDuie-Ra

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‘Is India Racist?’: Murder, Migration and Mary Kom

DUNCAN MCDUIE-RA, *University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia*

After the 2012 Olympics, Bronze Medal-winning boxer Mary Kom achieved national celebrity status in India. As a member of the Kom tribe, a Tibeto-Burman community from the Northeast region, she has come to represent a region long considered, and self-identifying, as outside the boundaries of the Indian nation. The same week that Mary Kom returned from London, thirty thousand Northeast migrants fled Indian cities fearing racially-motivated attacks. The so-called ‘exodus’ provoked rare conversations on racism within India. During this crisis, the figure of Mary Kom was invoked continually to challenge the existence of racism in India and posit paths to better integration in India’s cities. These conversations paid little attention to the brutality perpetrated by the Indian state and military in the Northeast itself and the voices that publicised this brutality. Thus, while Mary Kom has come to represent a Northeast that Indians can embrace, figures such as dissident Irom Sharmila represent a Northeast that Indians wish to forget.

Keywords: Racism; exodus; Mary Kom; Irom Sharmila; Northeast India

Introduction

At the 2012 Olympic Games in London, Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom (Mary Kom) won the Bronze Medal in the flyweight category in women’s boxing, which was appearing as an official sport for the first time. Mary is a member of the Kom tribe.¹ The Kom are a Tibeto-Burman people living in the hill areas of Manipur state in Northeast India. As the five-time women’s World Amateur Boxing Champion in the 46 kilogram class, Mary already enjoyed a high profile, but her success at the Olympics catapulted her into a national celebrity. On the national stage, there have been singers, actors, broadcasters, poets and dissidents from the Northeast, yet, until Mary, no one from the region had succeeded so publicly *for* India, rather than just *in* India. Furthermore, none had done so at a moment of such hyperbolic nationalism as during the Olympics.

In August 2012, the same week that Mary returned to India, migrants from different parts of the Northeast who were working or studying in Indian cities began to flee back home following rumours of targeted attacks by local mobs in Bangalore and Pune. Those targeted were anyone having so-called ‘Northeast’ features, often alluded to in India by the archaic term ‘mongoloid’ or the more overtly racist ‘chinky’. The so-called ‘exodus’, as well as the murders of Northeast migrants Loitam Richard in 2012 and Nido Tania in 2014, provoked rare conversations about racism at the national level. Terms such as ‘hate crime’, ‘racial profiling’ and ‘national shame’ have begun to circulate, and the question, ‘Is India racist?’, has become a

¹ The Kom are also referred to as Kakom or Komrem.

staple theme for talk shows and blogs, and amongst journalists within India and in global outlets.²

As a long-term scholar of the Northeast region, I have found the level of interest in the exodus and murders at the national level somewhat surprising. It is not that I do not believe there to be high levels of racism towards people from the Northeast region in India; indeed, I have argued strongly in the past that this is the case.³ What is striking, and largely unprecedented, is the great lengths that commentators and politicians have gone to in order to assuage the fears and insecurities of a population that is numerically small (relative to the national population), internally diverse and, thus, difficult to 'pin down', geographically distant, culturally distinct, and largely represented through the twin tropes of 'backward' and 'anti-national'. What does the reaction to the exodus say about social identities in India at a time of racial crisis? Where does an Olympic boxing medallist fit into the conversations circulating on race and nation in India? And what does the prominence of Mary Kom as an exemplary citizen from the Northeast suggest for other public figures from the region?

In these conversations about race and nation, Mary is constructed as a singular figure, representing not only her own ethnic group, but an entire region of diverse ethnic communities long considered (and self-identifying) as outside the boundaries of the Indian nation. As Sanjib Baruah notes, in 1940 the region was even dubbed India's 'mongoloid fringe' by Olaf Caroe, foreign secretary of the British Indian Government.⁴ Increased migration from the Northeast to Indian cities in the last decade has altered the frequency and intensity of encounters between mainstream India and ethnic minorities of Tibeto-Burman, Tai and Mon-Khmer origin. While clearly a limited term, 'mainstream India' helps to differentiate the Northeast from the rest of India even when accounting for the internal diversity and divisions within that mainstream. The Northeast is diverse and divided, though a sense of solidarity is becoming more pertinent, especially as racism continues to be debated.⁵ The racial distinctiveness of the Northeast maintains a gap—at once racial, geographic, cultural, spiritual and moral—between the Northeast and the rest of the country. This gap has remained over the last six decades following the end of British rule. Recently, the figure of Mary Kom has been invoked in times of crisis to demonstrate the ways in which this gap could be bridged.

By analysing the various ways in which the figure of Mary is constructed and situated in conversations on racism in contemporary India, I make four points of argument. First, as a national hero, Mary is constructed as a representative of the entire Northeast region, signifying the possibilities for the integration of its peoples into the national fold. Second, the exodus has opened conversations about racism in India, conversations long overshadowed by attention to racism experienced by Indians abroad. Third, conversations about racism are focussed on encounters in Indian cities and pay little attention to the brutality of the Indian state in the Northeast itself. Fourth, Mary's ascendancy as the dominant representation of the Northeast at the national level has made other eminent figures ethereal. The most dramatic example is Irom Sharmila, a woman from Manipur who has been on a hunger strike since 2001 protesting against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 (AFSPA).

² 'Delhi "Racism" in Focus after Assault', Al-Jazeera News (4 Feb. 2014) [<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/02/delhi-racism-focus-after-assault-20142345645503152.html>, accessed 9 Mar. 2014]; and 'India Protest over Student "Hate Crime" Death in Delhi', BBC News (3 Feb. 2014) [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26000534>, accessed 9 Mar. 2014].

³ Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

⁴ Sanjib Baruah, 'The Mongolian Fringe', in *Himal Southasian*, Vol. 26, no. 1 (2013), p. 82.

⁵ McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*, pp. 164–6.

As the primary concern of this article is representations of Mary Kom in debates at the national level, discursive analysis of media coverage is used extensively. Media outlets include national newspapers (print and online), regional newspapers from the Northeast, and national news and current affairs television. These were compiled based on whether they contained content on Mary, the exodus from Indian cities, and/or conversations about racism in India. While thousands of results were returned, the vast majority make only minor mention of these events or are reproductions of syndicated news stories. Deeper treatment of race was evident in newspaper editorials, op-ed pieces and discussion programmes on Indian current affairs television. Interestingly, discussions of Mary *and* the exodus or Mary *and* racism appeared most frequently in the English-language media whether based in Bangalore, Delhi or Chennai. This suggests the targeting of an audience more concerned with how the nation, and especially its cities, satisfies the kinds of cosmopolitan aspirations evident among the middle classes.⁶

It is important to iterate that the material in this article is shaped by the ways in which the figure of Mary Kom is publically constructed and deployed in conversations about race in India. I lay no claim to any knowledge of her personal views. Thus, when I use the term 'Mary Kom' or 'Mary', I am referring to Mary as a figure constructed publicly. Where relevant, I have taken public statements she has given the media to support points being made, recognising that these may (or may not) diverge from her own privately-held views. I have also gleaned insights from her autobiography, *Unbreakable*, published in 2013.⁷

The article is divided into six sections. The first provides background on the Northeast and Manipur. The second discusses the concept of race in contemporary India. The third analyses the way in which the figure of Mary Kom is constructed at the national level. The fourth discusses the crisis in race relations in India from 2012 onwards, illustrated by the exodus of Northeast migrants out of Indian cities. The fifth focuses on the use of Mary as a unifying figure for integration at this time of racial crisis. The final section compares the figure of Mary with that of Irom Sharmila, before offering some conclusions.

Northeast India

Northeast India shares over 90 percent of its borders with other countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China and Nepal. There are eight federal states in the region,⁸ within which are several autonomous territories. The region is populated by three main categories of people classified during the colonial era and institutionalised in the post-colonial Indian state: indigenous communities of Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman lineage classified as 'Scheduled Tribes', many of whom are Christians (including Mary Kom); other groups not classified as tribes but sharing ethnic lineage with groups in East and Southeast Asia (principally the Tai-Ahom of Assam and Meiteis of Manipur); and migrant communities from other parts of India and surrounding countries.

Armed struggles against India have taken place in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland in the decades since Indian Independence in 1947.⁹ Other states have had more sporadic anti-India movements. Inter-ethnic violence has become more common in the last

⁶ Leela Fernandes, 'The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India', in *Urban Studies*, Vol. 41, no. 12 (2004), pp. 2415–30.

⁷ Mary Kom, *Unbreakable: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2013).

⁸ They are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

⁹ Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995).

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'.¹⁰

Over the past five decades, Mary Kom's home state of Manipur has been ruptured by armed struggles against the Indian state seeking Manipur's independence, and internal struggles between different ethnic groups.¹¹ Instability has brought the Indian military and paramilitary to Manipur in large numbers where they are protected by the AFSPA, which permits any member of the armed forces to fire 'even to the causing of death' upon individuals acting in contravention of any law or order, carrying weapons or assembling in groups of five or more. Suspects can be detained for 24 hours with unlimited extensions and renewals and members of the armed forces are permitted to enter any premises without a warrant. Thus, the AFSPA provides legal protection for the military and paramilitary operating in the region.¹² A recent submission to the Supreme Court of India by civil society actors documented 1,528 killings by the armed forces in Manipur alone since 1979, with no charges brought against the perpetrators.¹³ For the Indian government, Manipur and the rest of the Northeast is treated as a 'troubled', but highly strategic region; whereas past policies were aimed at strengthening local autonomy, the last decade has seen a shift towards more intense economic, political and cultural integration of the Northeast into mainstream India. Mary Kom's success provides one such path to integration: sport.

Race in India

In this article, I use the concept of race when discussing relations between Northeast peoples and the Indian mainstream. Most Northeasterners have physical features that mark them out from the rest of the Indian ethnic and cultural milieu and subject them to derogatory names such as 'chinky', a putatively distinct category to which are ascribed particular attributes. I take as my starting point that racism towards people from the Northeast exists inasmuch as individuals and organisations from the area identify it and articulate it as a major factor in the ways they relate to the Indian state, society and nation.¹⁴ In order to even broach the issue of race in India, one has to fall back on generalisations of racially-defined groups (in this case, 'Indians' and 'Northeasterners'), a flawed exercise to be sure, but one that is enacted continually in social relations and in the public sphere. It is the concept of race that distinguishes the marginality experienced by *this* group and at *this* point in India's nationhood from the marginality experienced by others. It is helpful here to distinguish between 'emic' constructions of race, namely 'descriptions and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the members of

¹⁰ Willem van Schendel, 'The Dangers of Belonging: Tribes, Indigenous People, and Homelands in South Asia', in Daniel Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupa (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 36.

¹¹ John Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2005).

¹² Shubh Mathur, 'Life and Death in the Borderlands: Indian Sovereignty and Military Impunity', in *Race & Class*, Vol. 54, no. 1 (July–Sept. 2012), pp. 33–49; and Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Fifty-Year Disturbance: The Armed Forces Special Powers Act and Exceptionalism in a South Asian Periphery', in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (2009), pp. 255–70.

¹³ Human Rights Law Network, *Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association (EEVFAM) and Another versus Union of India & Another* (New Delhi: Human Rights Law Network, 2012).

¹⁴ McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*; and Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, 'The "Indian Face", India's Northeast, and "The Idea of India"', in *Asian Anthropology*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (2013), pp. 126–40.

the culture under study’, and ‘etic’ constructions, those meaningful to outside observers.¹⁵ Michael Banton comments that when it comes to race, emic descriptions ‘correspond to those that a patient uses to describe his or her symptoms’, while etic descriptions ‘correspond to those that a doctor uses to reach a diagnosis’.¹⁶ Northeastern people tend to construct race in an emic sense, though often through internalising etic constructions from the colonial past and post-colonial present.

Racism may exist for other communities in India, whether articulated as racism or something else, ‘casteism’ or communalism, for example. This is not my primary concern, although it is important to note that when racism towards Northeast communities is raised in the public sphere (and among scholars, for that matter), the response is often that many communities face discrimination in India and the case of Northeastern people is not unique. Enunciating this view following the 2012 Loitam murder, the then home minister, P. Chidambaram, commented in parliament that ‘some years ago, [discrimination] was based on language. Sometimes it was based on regions. Every south Indian who came to Delhi was called a Madrasi. Things have changed’.¹⁷ I disagree with this view. The case of Northeastern people *is* unique because it is couched almost exclusively in terms of race, rather than other fissures such as language, caste or religion. In other words, Northeast communities are frequently cast as being outside the boundaries of the Indian nation owing to their membership of a segment of the population identified by a racialised physicality. The appearance of someone with so-called ‘chinky’ features marks them as peripheral, and external to the hierarchies of caste, region and language that make up an established order—far from a just order to be sure—within the mainstream population; this is a position that some challenge and others embrace. Furthermore, there is the connotation of a connection to China, a connotation protestors used to punctuate their outrage in 2014, as will be seen below.

Mary Kom: National Hero

Here, I focus on the ways in which the figure of Mary is constructed at the national level by focusing on four manifestations of her subjectivity: (i) sporting hero; (ii) determined individual; (iii) ideal Northeast Indian; and (iv) empowered woman. I am cognisant of the fact that there is not a bounded ‘national-level Mary’, unaffected by the ways in which she is constructed in other spaces and in other publics (most notably in Manipur itself). Yet, it is by focusing on Mary as a national hero that insights into race in national debates are most visible.

(i) Sporting Hero

In contemporary India, the sporting hero, the film actor, the fashion model and the entrepreneur meet on the celebrity landscape.¹⁸ The sporting hero contributes to present

¹⁵ James Lett, ‘Emic/Etic Distinctions’, in David Levinson and Melvin Ember (eds), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), p. 382.

¹⁶ Michael Banton, ‘The Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of the Word Race’, in *Ethnicities*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2010), p. 131.

¹⁷ *Hindustan Times* (4 May 2012) [<http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/PC-NE-students-not-more-vulnerable-than-others/Article1-850568.aspx>, accessed 12 May 2012].

¹⁸ Abilash Nalapat and Andrew Parker, ‘Sport, Celebrity and Popular Culture: Sachin Tendulkar, Cricket and Indian Nationalisms’, in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 40, no. 4 (2005), pp. 433–46.

incarnations of Indian nationalism, wherein success and/or presence on the global stage play a significant role.¹⁹ Thus, the media and the public followed the London Olympics with a willingness, and perhaps pressure, to anoint national heroes. The staging of the Olympics in London, the heart of the former British Empire, likely held some significance in the desire for triumph, as did the success of China in hosting and competing in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.²⁰ As the Games went on and Indian athletes failed to meet medal expectations, Mary Kom became the focus of national aspirations. Furthermore, women's boxing was receiving attention from the global media as a debutante sport that created fascinating stories about its participants. Mary proved an ideal subject for television and radio profiles, not only as a female boxer from 'patriarchal India', but as the member of an ethnic minority from a largely unheard-of region.

In the BBC film, *Meeting Mary Kom*, racial differences between Mary and a standardised 'Indian-ness' are at the forefront of the narrative. The presenter introduces Manipur as a 'forgotten state', where the people 'don't even look Indian'.²¹ Mary herself comments on this during the film, when she states: 'I look like this Chinese or Thailand (*sic*). They never expect an Indian'.²² In *Unbreakable*, she comments further on her appearance, writing:

Because of our oriental looks, people from the Northeast are often mocked in other parts of India. We're called Nepalis or Chinkies, and people call us names like ching-ching chong-chong. . . . When I used to say I am from Manipur people didn't even know where it was. . . .²³

Language, too, becomes an issue, and Mary recounts that as she travelled more widely, she became 'acutely conscious of my inability to communicate effectively in either English or Hindi'.²⁴ Despite encountering racism and having her nationality questioned, she adds:

Whether or not I look 'Indian', I am Indian in my heart. Often, when I travelled abroad, the Chinese, Korean, Mongolian, Vietnamese or Thai athletes would mistake me for one of their own. Each time, I would explain I was Indian. But you look like us, not like them, they would say, pointing at my teammates.²⁵

As a national sporting hero, Mary is claimed by the nation unambiguously. For her part, Mary is very proud to be competing for India. She actively displays her national pride through words and through symbolic acts such as carrying the Indian flag at the closing ceremony of the Olympics. Following the Olympics, Mary was promoted to the rank of superintendent of police (sports), was granted land to run a sports academy in Manipur, and secured deals from numerous corporate sponsors ranging from Herbal Life to the National Egg Co-Ordination

¹⁹ Vidyadhar Date, 'Sports for a Few', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, no. 47 (2008), pp. 22–4; and Aswin Punathambekar, 'Bollywood in the Indian–American Diaspora. Mediating a Transitive Logic of Cultural Citizenship', in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2005), pp. 151–73.

²⁰ Pranab Bardhan, 'India and China: Governance Issues and Development', in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 68, no. 2 (2009), pp. 347–57.

²¹ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *World Olympic Dreams: Meeting Mary Kom* (dir. Andy Brownstone, narrator Emma Jane Kirby, 2012) [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BajBsayuleY>, accessed 12 July 2013].

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Kom, *Unbreakable*, p. 91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.



FIGURE 1. Mary Kom on a billboard in Imphal, June 2013.

Source: Photograph by author.

Committee. Since early 2013, she has been featured wearing her boxing gloves on billboards for Dalmia Cement, with the caption ‘Our Kommitment to the Nation: Now in the Northeast’ (Figure 1). Thus for Dalmia, Mary is both an entry into the Northeast market and a way of localising their profile in that market. Mary has participated in fashion shows, sung on television and, in the most telling sign of having ‘made it’ in mainstream India, she is the subject of a biographical film, *Mary Kom*, in which the high-profile Bollywood actor-celebrity, Priyanka Chopra, stars as Mary. Ironically, ethno-nationalist groups have banned Bollywood cinema in Manipur since 2000. When the film was released in mid 2014, it was banned in Manipur, although several reviews by Manipuris living outside the state have appeared in the media and been critical of the way Mary’s race is erased by the casting of Chopra. Writing in *The Hindu*, Bimol Akoijam comments that ‘the oriental face is not acceptable to the general public of this multicultural India’.²⁶ He adds: ‘Ms. Kom’s journey from rags-to-riches is a saleable product, especially for the growing population of an aspiring India...and for Bollywood’s NRI (Non-Resident Indian) consumers. But, presumably, they will not accept somebody who does not have the typical “Indian” look to play her role’.²⁷

(ii) *Determined Individual*

Mary’s story is one of individual determination against the odds, a narrative lauded in neo-liberal India. Throughout the Olympics, television crews travelled to Manipur to show Mary’s ‘humble’ village, while in a segment on NDTV entitled ‘Magnificent Mary’, the inside of

²⁶ A. Bimol Akoijam, ‘Race and Prejudice on Celluloid’, *The Hindu* (9 Sept. 2014) [<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/race-and-prejudice-on-celluloid/article6391835.ece>, accessed 12 Oct. 2014].

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Mary's family home was shown. The reporter noted the television set and the 'middle-class setting', brought to these meagre surroundings 'thanks to Mary', in contrast to the rest of the village.²⁸ The producer of the film about her life, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, noted: 'I was moved by her story. She is a mother of two, has been through so many struggle (*sic*), has tremendous spirit and a sense of living and dignity and is now a World Champion'.²⁹ Bhansali's comments echo the 'new' India, where lack of entitlement and connections can be overcome by an individual's determination.³⁰ It is also where success at the national level can overcome the violence of the unruly frontier region. Supriya Chaudhuri articulates this view in her study of women's sport in India, stating: 'Mary Kom has chosen, through sport, to achieve a measure of freedom and detachment from the political turmoil surrounding her'.³¹ Indeed, suspected militants murdered Mary's father-in-law and she discusses wanting revenge in *Unbreakable*.³²

(iii) *Ideal Northeast Indian*

There are others from the Northeast who have made their mark at the national level such as Agatha Sangma (politics), Binalakshmi Nepram (activism) and Sourabhee Debbarma (singing), yet none of these figures have transcended the political, cultural and racial distance between the Northeast and the rest of India in the same way as Mary Kom has. Mary embodies a 'good news' story about the Northeast. As Manipuri writer Yembem Laba wrote in *The Statesman*, referring to Mary's success: 'Manipur, for a change, was in both national as well as international news for reasons other than insurgency, AIDS, drugs, ethnic strife, killings and economic blockades or even the dreaded AFSPA'.³³ Furthermore, Mary's success suggests the region has more to offer India than is recognised in the 'political turmoil' narrative. Her success implies that the region may contain star athletes as well as natural resources and call centre workers, and that her pathway to success can be replicated.

On CNN-IBN's current affairs programme, *Face the Nation*, aired on 10 August 2012, the former bureaucrat and tennis player, Kiran Bedi, captured this view, saying: 'The entire North East is full of Mary Koms. They eat well also, their diet is mostly non-vegetarian, and it has high protein. So I think we need to capitalise on this hidden talent'.³⁴ Interestingly, the consumption of meat, which is often used to exclude Northeast people from the Indian mainstream, is here reframed as a desired attribute for building more athletes. As pointed out in *Meeting Mary Kom*, Manipur 'supplies India with a disproportionate amount of top

²⁸ New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV), 'The Life and Times of Magnificent Mary' (prod. Pallav Sharma) (11 Aug. 2012) [<http://sports.ndtv.com/olympics-2012/videos/the-life-and-times-of-magnificent-mary-242391>, accessed 1 Sept. 2012].

²⁹ 'Boxer Mary Kom's Life on Celluloid!', Zee News (8 Aug. 2012) [http://www.zeenews.india.com/entertainment/bollywood/boxer-mary-koms-life-on-celluloid_117577.html, accessed 13 July 2013]. Incidentally, Mary had a third child in 2013.

³⁰ Ravinder Kaur, 'Nation's Two Bodies: Rethinking the Idea of "New" India and its Other', in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 33, no. 4 (2012), pp. 603–21.

³¹ Supriya Chaudhuri, 'In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body', in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 29, no. 12 (2012), p. 1770.

³² Kom, *Unbreakable*, p. 76.

³³ Yembem Laba, 'Magnificent Mary Struggled to Glorify Manipur', *The Statesman* (21 Aug. 2012) [<http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=leisure.Sports.Magnificent-Mary-struggled-to-glorify-Manipur>, accessed 13 July 2013].

³⁴ Cable News Network-Indian Broadcasting Network (CNN-IBN), 'Has Mary Kom Broken Stereotypes about North East Women?', on *Face the Nation* (10 Aug. 2012) [<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/has-mary-kom-broken-stereotypes-about-north-east-women/280789-3-225.html>, accessed 31 Aug. 2012].

athletes' and Mary's success could 'steer Delhi's focus' towards Manipur and the region.³⁵ The assumption here is that dissatisfaction (and anti-Indian feeling) in the region are a result of economic neglect; thus, success in sport might help to get the region more resources. Yet, as analysts of the area routinely point out, the Indian government transfers extraordinary amounts of resources to the Northeast.³⁶ Nevertheless, at the national level, economic neglect is cited as the reason for grievances in the Northeast, thus relegating other grievances to the realm of the irrational and unfixable.

(iv) *Empowered Woman*

Race and gender intersect in explanations of Mary's interest in boxing and her capacity to succeed at it. As a woman from a region with different gender relations to mainstream India, namely less patriarchal and more egalitarian, and with a long history of resistance to external forces,³⁷ Mary is the embodiment of the (mythologised) empowered Northeastern woman. Racial difference produces exceptional gender relations, and when these gender relations result in sporting success, they are viewed positively; yet, the same gender relations are routinely used to negatively stereotype Northeastern women; given their mobility, independence and 'non-traditional' dress, Northeastern women are cast as less moral, more available for male attention, and deserving of the harassment and violence they experience because they have 'brought it on themselves'.³⁸

For some commentators, Mary's success holds the prospect of challenging negative stereotypes of Northeastern women. For instance, during the aforementioned *Face the Nation* episode, a panel of eminent Indian women discussed what Mary's success means for Northeastern women.³⁹ Interestingly, the panel reproduced most of the stereotypes they set out to debunk: Northeastern women are 'thin and fit'; Northeastern women are empowered (as evident in their visible role in the economy); gender relations in the Northeast are more egalitarian (one panellist incorrectly claimed gender relations there are matrilineal, but this is only true in parts of Meghalaya); the Northeast is an untapped resource for female athletes; and Northeastern women are victims of violence. On this last point, the panel discussed how Mary's fame should make men think twice before committing violence against Northeastern women because they can punch back.

There are also more universal ways in which gender shapes the figure of Mary at the national level. Her success in the 'masculine domain' of boxing, while at the same time being a wife and mother, has cast her as a 'supermum' and an inspiration to other Indian women to succeed in male-dominated aspects of life without sacrificing their reproductive roles. Mary's children and husband figure regularly in stories about her, and her mother featured in a promotional film for the multinational manufacturer Proctor and Gamble profiling the

³⁵ BBC, *World Olympic Dreams*.

³⁶ Sanjib Baruah, *Postfrontier Blues: Toward a New Policy Framework for Northeast India* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2007); and Duncan McDuié-Ra, 'Between National Security and Ethnonationalism: The Regional Politics of Development in Northeast India', in *Journal of South Asian Development*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (2008), pp. 185–210.

³⁷ Saroj Nandini Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, 'The Second "Women's War" and the Emergence of Democratic Government in Manipur', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, no. 4 (2001), pp. 905–19.

³⁸ Paporí Bora, 'Between the Human, the Citizen and the Tribal: Reading Feminist Politics in India's Northeast', in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 12, nos. 3–4 (2010), pp. 341–60.

³⁹ CNN-IBN, 'Has Mary Kom Broken Stereotypes?'

'Mothers Behind the Athletes', which aired during the Olympics.⁴⁰ We are also constantly reminded of the boxer's femininity: in the BBC film *Meeting Mary Kom*, Mary is shown shopping for dresses, and the presenter notes her 'gentleness'. Later in the film, when Mary is shown in the ring sparring against male boxers, the presenter states that the 'gentle mother-like figure becomes a tiger'.⁴¹

Racial Crisis

In his analysis of the political thinking of the black French football star, Lilian Thuram, Grant Farred locates Thuram in the 'over-burdened conjuncture of sport and national self-understanding'.⁴² This is an apt way to describe the situation in contemporary India, where Mary Kom's anointing as a national hero and the emerging crisis in race relations reveal a great deal about competing social identities in the country.

First, it is important to understand the increased contact between Northeast peoples and mainstream India in Indian cities. In the period from 2005 to 2011, a twelve-fold increase in migration out of the Northeast to Indian cities was recorded; around half a million Northeastern people reside outside the region.⁴³ Migrants from the Northeast are highly visible in the retail, hospitality, airline and call centre industries. Violence back home, the availability of work in Indian cities (especially when compared to the local economies in the Northeast), and the possibility of being able to work and pursue further study have encouraged Northeasterners from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds to migrate.⁴⁴ Migration has shifted the ways in which Northeast subjectivity is constructed: the exotic frontier dweller depicted in colonial ethnography and in post-colonial tourist campaigns has become the exotic waitress dressed in a Chinese cheongsam in a shopping mall restaurant or the shop assistant dressed in the latest Korean fashion in an upmarket boutique.⁴⁵

Violence against migrants has increased during this same period.⁴⁶ The murder in April 2012 of Loitam Richard, a 25-year-old Manipuri studying in Bangalore, was the tipping point for many migrants, unleashing their anger and frustration. The nature of Richard's murder (he was killed by housemates in an argument over a television remote control) and the fact that it happened in Bangalore (long considered safer than other Indian cities by Northeast migrants) provoked a series of protests and vigils in Indian cities and in the Northeast. Following the murder, Manipuri scholar Yengkhom Jilangamba wrote in *The Hindu*:

...every once in a while, there will be an incident of extreme, outrageous violence that is transparently racial in nature and we will rally around and voice our anger but it is these insidious, everyday forms of racial discrimination that bruise the body and the

⁴⁰ Proctor and Gamble, 'Raising an Olympian: Mary Kom' [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Jok3pQpj8Q>], accessed 15 Aug. 2013].

⁴¹ BBC, *World Olympic Dreams*.

⁴² Grant Farred, "'Keeping Silent": The Problem of Citizenship for Lilian Thuram', in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 35, no. 6 (2012), p. 1041.

⁴³ North East Support Centre & Helpline, *North East Migration and Challenges in National Capital Cities* (Delhi: North East Support Centre & Helpline, 2011).

⁴⁴ Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Beyond the "Exclusionary City": North-East Migrants in Neo-Liberal Delhi', in *Urban Studies*, Vol. 50, no. 8 (June 2013), pp. 1625–40.

⁴⁵ McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*, p. 168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7.

mind, build up anger and frustration. Fighting these everyday humiliations exhausts our attempts at expression.⁴⁷

Such was the extent of frustration felt by Northeast migrants that the prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh, hosted a delegation of Northeast migrants in May 2012.⁴⁸ Although he condemned the killings, he denied any racial motivation. Following calls by activists for more protection for Northeast migrants, the Ministry of Home Affairs claimed that racism against Northeasterners was already prevented under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and that law enforcement officers should book offenders accordingly. However, the Act does not apply to all Northeast communities (as not all are Scheduled Tribes) and there is a poor track record on convictions; consequently, its invocation did little to placate anger.⁴⁹

Anger turned to anxiety in August 2012, when the fear of attacks on Northeast migrants in Pune and Bangalore led an estimated thirty thousand Northeasterners to flee Indian cities.⁵⁰ The initial attacks were apparently in response to attacks on Indian labourers in the northeast state of Assam by members of the Boro ethnic group; in response, a Tibetan student was seriously stabbed in Mysore, indicating that physical features alone would mark out potential victims, regardless of their actual place of origin.

Governments in the Northeast states made provisions for the safe return of their citizens. Scenes of crowded trains leaving Indian cities were flashed during news bulletins and featured in the national press. The Indian government banned bulk text messaging and up to 245 web pages were blocked to stop the spread of rumours.⁵¹ With Northeast migrants feeling increasingly unsafe, state governments in the Northeast advising their constituents to return home, and the employers of Northeast labour seeing costs to business,⁵² the Indian government was forced to step in to reassure Northeasterners of their safety and, in keeping with convention, blamed Pakistan for inciting chaos.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, this did little to allay the feelings of insecurity among migrants. As Naga scholar Dolly Kikon wrote in the national newspaper, *The Hindu*:

The majority of those who left (Indian cities) for northeast India are, along with other similar migrants, the invisible face of global India: cooks in ethnic restaurants that can whip up cuisine from every corner of country, security guards who protect ATM

⁴⁷ Yengkhom Jilangamba, 'Let's Stop Pretending There's No Racism in India', *The Hindu* (29 May 2012) [<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/lsts-stop-pretending-theres-no-racism-in-india/article3467147.ece>, accessed 30 May 2012].

⁴⁸ *Sangai Express* (Imphal) (10 May 2012), p. 1.

⁴⁹ *Hueiyen Lampao* (Imphal) (7 June 2012), p. 1.

⁵⁰ Laldinkima Sailo, 'The Great "Exodus": Violence in Assam and its Aftermath', in *ISAS Insights*, no. 187 (2012), p. 1.

⁵¹ S. Ronendra Singh 'North-East Panic: Govt Blocks 245 Web Pages', *The Hindu Business Line* (20 Aug. 2012) [<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/northeast-panic-govt-blocks-245-web-pages/article3798973.ece>, accessed 16 July 2013].

⁵² Biswarup Gooptu and Devina Sengupta, 'North East Exodus: Bangalore Businesses Facing the Impact', *The Economic Times* (17 Aug. 2012) [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-08-17/news/33249545_1_mysore-bangalore-software-industry, accessed 19 Aug. 2012]; and Arun Janardhanan, 'NE Exodus may Hit Construction Sector', *The Times of India* (21 July 2012) [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-21/chennai/33302035_1_migrant-labourers-migrant-workers-unskilled-workers, accessed 19 Aug. 2012].

⁵³ *The Times of India* (20 Aug. 2012) [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-20/india/33286894_1_india-and-pakistan-rehman-malik-false-pictures-and-stories, accessed 24 Aug. 2012].

machines, corporate offices, or industries that push India as a global power, drivers who chauffeur cosmopolitan citizens and corporate executives, or waiters who wear ethnic costumes so that customers can absorb the aura of India. The exodus of these workers from Indian cities reveals their insecurities.⁵⁴

As a consequence, attention to relations between the Northeast and the rest of India gained a new urgency and brought racism into national-level conversations.

This is highly significant. Consideration of racism in India has been overshadowed by historical experiences of racism during colonial rule,⁵⁵ so-called communal frictions including Hindu–Muslim conflict,⁵⁶ and debates around caste.⁵⁷ In 2001, at the UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban, the Indian delegation walked out of the conference following discussions that equated caste with racism, despite this debate already having a considerable lineage in India prior to the conference, with many Dalit activists pushing for recognition of caste discrimination as racism.⁵⁸ Furthermore, intellectuals and politicians in India have had a history of speaking out against racism in other parts of the world, particularly in South Africa and the United States.⁵⁹ But racism had been externalised: it was something that happened outside India. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, in India, racism has come to mean something ‘white people do to us’.⁶⁰ The Bradford riots in the UK in 2001 and the violent attacks on Indian students in Australia between 2009 and 2014 were widely covered in the Indian media both at home and abroad. The racist attacks on Indian students received such widespread coverage in India and Australia that the Australian national broadcaster, the ABC, created a programme where four young Indians with negative perceptions about Australians were taken on a tour of the country by a local host who tried to convince them that Australians are not all ‘dumb, drunk and racist’, also the title of the programme. Racist violence, abuse and the denial of rights in these locations are very real and indefensible, yet the preoccupation with this kind of racism makes introspection on racism *within* India very difficult. As Purba Das points out, contemporary campaigns to promote a unified national Indian identity promote a ‘race-less’ and ‘caste-less’ India, though these constructions co-exist alongside a legislative framework wherein one’s legal, economic and social prospects are determined by membership of a particular, constitutionally-defined category.⁶¹

For many people from the Northeast, racism by Indians not only marks their experiences of Indian cities, but also their experiences of the Indian state back home in the Northeast. Yet, it took the possibility of Northeast migrants abandoning Indian cities, and their vital economic niches, to bring racism into national focus.

⁵⁴ Dolly Kikon, ‘Home is Hardly the Best’, *The Hindu* (20 Aug. 2012) [<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/home-is-hardly-the-best/article3796017.ece>, accessed 23 Aug. 2012].

⁵⁵ Crispin Bates, ‘Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry’, in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 219–59.

⁵⁶ Zaheer Baber, ‘“Race”, Religion and Riots: The “Racialization” of Communal Identity and Conflict in India’, in *Sociology*, Vol. 38, no. 4 (Oct. 2004), pp. 701–18.

⁵⁷ Deepa Reddy, ‘The Ethnicity of Caste’, in *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 78, no. 3 (2005), pp. 543–84.

⁵⁸ Ambrose Pinto, ‘UN Conference against Racism: Is Caste Race?’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, no. 30 (2001), pp. 2817–20.

⁵⁹ Anirudha Gupta, ‘India and Africa South of the Sahara’, in *International Studies*, Vol. 17, nos. 3–4 (July 1978), pp. 639–53; and Fenise A. Logan, ‘Racism and Indian–US Relations, 1947–1953: Views in the Indian Press’, in *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 54, no. 1 (1985), pp. 71–9.

⁶⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Modernity and Ethnicity in India’, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XVII, Special Issue (1994), p. 145.

⁶¹ Purba Das, ‘Casteless, Raceless India: Constitutive Discourses of National Integration’, in *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (2013), pp. 221–40.

Mary Kom, Patriotism and Integration

It was during this period of crisis that Mary Kom was deployed as a unifying figure in the media. Mary's success was cited as a reason why racism does not exist and to show that the Northeast contains loyal Indian citizens. Following Richard's murder, *Face the Nation* aired a programme entitled 'Can the North East ever become Part of the Indian Mainstream?'⁶² During the discussion, the possibility of racism in the Richard case was raised. In response, the host of the programme, Sagarika Ghose, said:

I speak here as a sympathiser of the Northeast cause. Is it important not to see racism, not to see violence where perhaps there isn't? Because there are also many examples of many people who are from the Northeast who have come and become great success story (*sic*). Baichung Bhutia (a football player from Sikkim), MC Mary Kom are only two examples. . .so we also need to be nuanced in the way we view crime against people from the Northeast because if we see racism and hate crime where there is none that could also be counterproductive.⁶³

Ghose's response reveals the centrality of successful Northeasterners, in this case sports people, to challenging the notion of racism. In the same broadcast, she urged Northeast people to not get caught in the 'victim syndrome' and added: 'why not take your fate in your own hands? Pull yourself up by your bootstraps and plunge in to the metros (cities)'.⁶⁴

National news network NDTV's flagship current affairs programme is *The Big Fight*, a one-hour panel discussion in front of a studio audience. As Mary returned from the Olympics, *The Big Fight* aired a panel discussion on 'Will Mary Kom's Win Change Attitudes Towards Northeast', featuring eight panellists ranging from politicians from the region to journalists who have covered the region to retired civil servants.⁶⁵ While the content of the debate settled into a fairly familiar conversation (Northeast people need to try harder to adapt, and Indians need to recognise Northeast people as true Indians), the connection between Mary's success and the possibility of a change in interracial relations is instructive.

During the pinnacle of the exodus in mid August, Mary appeared on the national network, CNN-IBN, to call for calm, stating: 'we are all Indians and proud of the idea of India. *Jai Hind!*'⁶⁶ Her statement was replayed over the coming days during breaks in programming. While thousands of Northeast migrants were fleeing Bangalore, Mary was quoted in *The Times of India* as saying she would consider moving to the very same city with her family.⁶⁷ Following her statement, the same article included editorial comment that read:

⁶² Cable News Network-Indian Broadcasting Network (CNN-IBN), 'Can the North East ever become Part of the Indian Mainstream?', on *Face the Nation* (4 May 2012) [<http://ibnlive.in.com/videos/254555/ftn-can-the-north-east-ever-become-part-of-the-indian-mainstream..>, accessed 30 Aug. 2012].

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV), 'Will Mary Kom's Win Change Attitudes Towards Northeast?', on *The Big Fight* (11 Aug. 2012) [<http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-big-fight/will-mary-kom-s-win-change-attitudes/242435>, accessed 30 Aug. 2012].

⁶⁶ *Jai Hind* is a patriotic chant that roughly translates as 'Hail India' or 'Long Live India'. Cable News Network-Indian Broadcasting Network (CNN-IBN), 'NE Exodus: Mary Kom, Baichung Bhutia Appeal for Calm' (18 Aug. 2012) [<http://ibnlive.in.com/videos/283214/ne-exodus-mary-kom-baichung-bhutia-appeal-for-calm.html>, accessed 30 Aug. 2012].

⁶⁷ Srivathsa Sridhar, 'Want to Settle in Bangalore: Mary Kom', *The Times of India* (23 Aug. 2012) [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-23/boxing/33340792_1_mary-kom-k-onler-manipur, accessed 2 Sept. 2012].

At a time when people from the Northeast are fleeing from many parts of the country in rumour-fuelled fear for their lives, this is heartening news. It is particularly so given the fact that the epicentre of the exodus was in Bangalore. In life, as in the ring, Mary Kom has shown that she is one who is willing to fight the odds. We hope that this gesture will instill some much-needed confidence and encourage others from the Northeast to return to their jobs elsewhere in the country.⁶⁸

As the ideal Northeast Indian, the figure of Mary Kom is deployed instrumentally to encourage Northeast migrants to stay in the cities and keep working, and symbolically to emphasise that the Northeast is part of the 'idea of India'. Being part of the 'idea of India' entails assuaging separatist notions, the 'idea of independence' as it were, and downplaying the feelings of insecurity and un-belonging that fuelled the exodus. The statement also suggests times have changed: Northeast people can belong and they can demonstrate this by staying put—the choice is theirs to make.

Interestingly, the possibility that this embrace by the Indian nation may be highly undesirable for some Northeasterners, even those living in Indian cities, is rarely mentioned in these conversations. Recognition of resistance to India by communities in the Northeast is almost completely absent. This is not to argue that resistance is the only position that individuals and communities in the Northeast have with regard to their place in the nation; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, citizenship and belonging within India are ongoing questions for many in the Northeast.⁶⁹ Rather, it is to point out that grievances and violence experienced in the Northeast are absent from national conversations on racism. The issue has become one of identifying the best path to integration, not on whether integration is desirable in the first place.

Despite Mary's intervention and the return of enough Northeast migrants to Bangalore and Delhi for the exodus to disappear from the public lexicon, race was back on the national agenda in early 2014 when Nido Tania, a student from Arunachal Pradesh, was severely beaten with iron rods by a mob after reacting to racial taunts from a shopkeeper in Lajpat Nagar market in Delhi over his dyed blond hair. He died the following day. Politicians were quick to speak out against the beating, and the question 'Is India Racist?' returned to television panel programmes, newspapers and online forums.⁷⁰ Student unions from various Northeast communities campaigned hard on the issue in the Northeast and in cities like Delhi and Bangalore, while others urged Northeasterners to stop migrating to Indian cities. For instance, a spokesperson for the Mongoloid Peoples Forum, K. Zou, urged members of the 'mongoloid community in the country [to] avoid living with your own whims and fancies in the mainland for the sake of our own safety'.⁷¹ At a protest in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, young Mizo men and women gathered outside Raj Bhawan, the residence of the state's governor—a position appointed by the Government of India and a strong symbol of the Indian state—with placards reading 'Hello China' and containing maps of India with the Northeast removed.⁷² The fact that these protests were happening in Aizawl, a long way from Nido's home state of Arunachal Pradesh, suggests a common racial identity is being articulated in

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ McDuie-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi*, pp. 178–81.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, the conversation aired on New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV), 'Are Indians Racist?', on *The Big Fight* (8 Feb. 2014) [<http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-big-fight/the-big-fight-are-indians-racist/308737>, accessed 15 Feb. 2014].

⁷¹ *Morung Express* (Dimapur) (2 Mar. 2014) [<http://www.morungexpress.com/frontpage/111855.html>], accessed 5 Mar. 2014].

⁷² *Vanglaini* (Aizawl) (13 Feb. 2014), p. 1.

various parts of the Northeast in response to racism experienced in mainstream India. This is no mean feat considering the historical and contemporary conflicts that have occurred between ethnic groups in parts of the region.

Pride and Shame

Where there is concern about racism at the national level, it is racism as experienced in Indian cities, not racism as experienced in the Northeast. In other words, the standard conversation posits that Northeast migrants need to be treated better in Indian cities, and also to stop complaining about mistreatment, while what happens to them back home is well beyond the responsibility of mainstream society. This has the odd consequence of re-placing Northeast peoples in the familiarity of urban India while detaching them from the complex politics of the region itself. This shift also marginalises the voices in the region that publicise the brutality of frontier life.

Perhaps the most visceral reminder of state violence is Irom Sharmila Chanu, a woman from Manipur who has been on a hunger strike since 2001 in protest against the AFSPA. Sharmila maintains her hunger strike while under arrest in the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Science in Imphal, where she is force-fed through an intravenous drip. She goes through a continuous cycle of release, re-arrest and court appearances. Sharmila is a complex figure, especially within Manipur itself. Like Mary Kom, she has also been made into a symbol of an entire region. While in the Northeast she is associated to a more specific struggle in Manipur, and in particular among the Meitei community, at the national level she is the embodiment of state brutality in the Northeast and a reminder of the grievances of the people in the region, the mistrust many have of India, and the catalysts that lead so many young people to emigrate. Among human rights activists in India and beyond, she is known for her heroism, her resistance to militarism and the Indian state, and the way her body is used symbolically in her politics. As Namrata Gaikwad writes:

Now it matters little when she dies, having consigned her body to death, and with only the state keeping her alive, Sharmila has become a fantasy of the state, a fantasy it is unable to get rid of. If she was to die, it would not haunt any less as she will have been the ghost they kept alive for so many years. When she dies, she will, if anything, gain in mythical proportions. The question that will continue to haunt the Indian state is why could they not let her die? The answer is, of course, because of the meaning that has accrued onto her body.⁷³

Mary Kom and Irom Sharmila are both women from Manipur known on the national stage and beyond, yet their symbolism could not be more strikingly different: Mary is India's pride; Sharmila is India's shame. If Mary symbolises the potential for healing relations between the Northeast and mainstream India, Sharmila symbolises the lived experience of violence that makes such healing difficult to ever contemplate. It is perhaps their bodies that provide the most compelling gap. Mary is fit, athletic—a 'tiger' in the ring. She is often photographed with fists raised, ready to spar, or in her boxing singlet, exposing the muscles on her bare arms and shoulders. She is also photographed draped in the Indian flag or holding her medal in her national team tracksuit. By contrast, Sharmila's body is wasting away. She is frail, thin and speaks from her hospital bed with tubes up her nose. The only visible manifestations of the

⁷³ Namrata Gaikwad, 'Revolted Bodies, Hysterical State: Women Protesting the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)', in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (2009), p. 308.

Indian state in her vicinity are the security personnel charged with ensuring that she does not die.

Neither woman appears in complete control of the ways in which her body, her actions and her image are used. While suggesting that the figure of Mary might help to erase, at least in part, the figure of Sharmila from the national imaginary, I am in no way suggesting that this is a reflection of anything said or done by Mary herself. Rather, I wish to suggest that the figure of Mary and her sporting success for India becomes a far more desirable representation of the Northeast *for* India (and for many people in the Northeast itself) because of the contrast with the figure of Irom Sharmila and her decade-plus fast against violence committed *by* India against civilians from the racially-distinct frontier. Mary is Irom's 'other'.

Conclusion

Mary Kom is a remarkable athlete and individual. She is proud to be a tribal, proud to be from Manipur and proud to be Indian. She wants to box, to succeed and to help others succeed, especially those from her home state. She cannot be faulted for that. Like many sports people from ethnic and racial minorities, she is claimed by the same nation that marginalises other members of her ethnic group and, in a regional sense, her 'mongoloid' race. She is included in the 'us' of the Indian national imaginary, while also continuing to be cast as 'other', though an exceptional 'other', capable of illuminating a path to a more integrated nation. While this may be in the best interests of India as a nation and a polity, it does little to address the grievances of people in the Northeast or to recognise resistance to national integration. At the same time as Mary was being felicitated for her success, rumours of violence against Northeast migrants in Indian cities triggered an exodus back to the region. In the Northeast itself, military occupation and extraordinary legal provisions continue to produce human rights violations, disappearances and killings. Evidently, many Northeast people experience India in very different ways to successful athletes. Irom Sharmila is a symbolic counterpoint to Mary Kom. Her wasting body, protesting the violence of the Indian state, contrasts with Mary's fit and active body furthering the glory of the same India. One evokes India's shame, the other Indian pride. Both represent the conjectures of Manipur, where young people have few options other than sport, insurgency or migration. The figure of Mary has been utilised in various ways, most beyond her control. Yet, as an embodiment of the ideal Northeast Indian, her figure is a telling symbol of the ways in which race and nation function and dysfunction in contemporary India.