

Mona Chettri. 2017. *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Over the past decades, ethnic politics has been a defining feature of democracy in South Asia. Organized in seven chapters, *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy*, provides an interesting account on how ethnic politics has been shaped in the eastern Himalayas, which includes Sikkim, Darjeeling and the eastern hills of Nepal otherwise known as Limbuwan. The book starts with questioning the function of the state vis-à-vis ethnicity formation and argues that ethnic politics serves as a tool for mobilization of resources and patronage by the state as well as ethnic elites.

The first chapter provides an important insight into ethnicity formation in the eastern Himalayan borderland that demarcates the territorial boundary between Nepal and India. This chapter provides a critical overview of the formation of Gorkha principality and how the state of Nepal assumed a supreme position. The Nepali state's control over land, which was then a core source of income was also an instrument of patronage in the lives of hills people. The author notes that the change in the land tenure system had alienated the Limbus from their own land and led to their migration from Nepal to India. In addition, factors such as growth of the tea-estate and recruitment to the Gorkha army facilitated migration from Nepal to India. Meanwhile the change in land-tenure from *kipat* (communal land ownership) to *raikar* (government owned) acted as a push factor from within Nepal. The chapter elaborates how further aspects, particularly language, became instrumental in shaping identity in the eastern hills. The author explains that the making of the ethno-linguistic community called Nepali was a result of the conspicuous effort of the educated elites of the Darjeeling hills. Although the chapter provides important insight into how the Nepali language became an important tool for unity in the Indian hills, it does not provide ample focus on how the same became a core source of aversion towards the state for the Limbus in Nepal.

The second and third chapters provide an account of how the state becomes an important agent of ethnic politics. These chapters present a case of how, while ethnic politics is perpetuated by the state, the state also becomes the benefactor of ethnic politics through various channels.

These chapters present an important relation among economic deprivation, state-provisions and ethnicity formation. The second chapter exclusively focuses on the relation between the development paradigm and the rise of ethnic politics through an analysis of patron-client networks prevalent both in Nepal and India. The core argument establishes that exclusion from the development framework fosters a feeling of otherness that gives rise to ethnic politics; ethnic discrimination keeps ethnic minorities disenfranchised from the benefits of state-led development in Nepal. For Nepal's experience with ethnicity and democracy, the book focuses on the eastern hills where Limbus reside. It is in fact a drawback of the book that it focuses so narrowly on a single ethnic minority population, thus failing to explain the diversity inherent in the hills and the placement of Limbus within this diversity. The writer also does not explain her reasons behind choosing this group in particular out of the diverse communities residing in this region.

The third chapter discusses identity construction and its politics. This chapter highlights Indian citizenship, sacrifice and bravery as key determinants of Gorkha identity formation. The idea of bravery and martyrdom is shown to have laid the foundation of the Gorkhaland movement. The chapter establishes the fact that Gorkhaland movement is a search for recognition while remaining within the state, which differentiates it from secessionist movements prevalent in India. However, the chapter fails to address the interface of real practices and imagined constructions. It therefore fails to query the boundaries and scope of the nation as imagined community. Identity politics also operates through the process of exclusion of those who cannot readily be encompassed by the frame of national identity (Anderson 2006). The chapter makes a lop-sided analysis in the case of Nepal, emphasizing that it is the prevalence of nepotism and corruption that determines the public distribution of services and goods through government agencies. In doing so, the chapter overlooks the area of development and rights (Shneiderman 2009), which largely is determined by the presence of international aid in Nepal. The analysis is limited by its failure to consider the processes through which goods and services are delivered through international aid agencies as opposed to through the government. There is, however, a robust analysis of the reservation system in India and the welfare distributed by the Indian state and how affirmative action has created new avenues of identity construction in Darjeeling and Sikkim. The book effectively elaborates that cultural distinctness has thus gained primacy as a marker of identity in India,

giving rise to internal divisions within the Nepali ethnic groups in India. The government of India has introduced reservation policies and subsidies for scheduled tribes (ST), which has made the cultural distinctness more pronounced. The author emphasizes that this practice has given rise to ethnic groups seeking to display their culture to claim their share in the reservations and subsidies. Readers of this chapter may find it challenging to navigate the complex differences between the Nepali and Indian ethnic politics.

The fourth and the fifth chapters illustrate how dominant political parties use visual display of Nepali culture to assert ethnic politics. In the eastern hills of India the dominant party, Sikkim Democratic Front, dictated the dress code which was a conscious effort to subvert cultural diversity. The author elaborates how this practice sought to establish a Gorkha identity in opposition to the dominant Bengali identity. The crux of these chapters lies in their insights about how this kind of cultural politics was rooted within a nationalist frame. Hence here the author explains how a paradigm of nationalism infuses ethnic politics, focusing on how the bravery of Gorkha is cast in terms of their sacrifice for Mother India. This section of chapter five thus highlights the use of ethnic politics within state-approved parameters. Together, chapters four and five critique the use of ethnic politics for material gain and socio-cultural divisions, while also recognizing how ethnic politics has played a role in fostering inclusive democracy. An important weakness of these chapters, however, is their failure to explain adequately the role of ethnic associations built across the border in Nepal, and how they impact ethnic politics in India.

This book in totality is an interesting read. It addresses multiple factors associated with ethnic politics. It particularly highlights the factors that are shaping ethnic politics in the eastern hills of India. However, the book has failed to discern conceptions of the nation state, nationality and national identity in the case of shared borderlands like that of Nepal and India. The book claims to highlight issues of ethnicity formation in the shared borderland of the eastern hills of Nepal and India where the territorial boundary is largely blurred. However, the interface between state power and citizens encountering and imagining their identity differently in these shared borderlands, where the state exist simultaneously as material force and as ideological construct, does not emerge clearly.

References

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