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Review of "The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling" by Townsend Middleton

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Swatahsiddha Sarkar on *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling*.

The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling.

Townsend Middleton. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 278 pages. ISBN 9780804796262.

Reviewed by Swatahsiddha Sarkar

The yearnings for lost tradition and cultural revivalism and concerns for community identity and its recognition are increasing at a rapid pace in South Asian politics and beyond, making it a global phenomenon. Townsend Middleton's timely book, *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling*, addresses these concerns as they emerged in the context of India's Darjeeling hills in the recent past. Throughout its seven chapters, flanked by an introduction and epilogue, the book maps out the escalation of ethnopolitics in the Darjeeling hills and its presumed shift from being a fierce battle of statehood in the 1980s towards a more accommodative politics of recognition and affirmative action in the new millennium. Middleton delves deep to show how state ethnography in the post-colonial period negotiates with communities aspiring for tribal status in the eyes of the government and how this encounter gave birth to "ethnologies" that differentially affect those who do or do not fit into the state-prescribed calculus of recognition. The book addresses many themes of theoretical

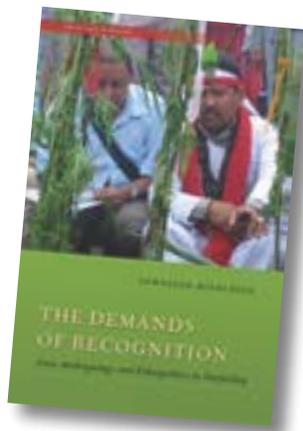
and methodological significance, including state ethnography, contradictions in the politics of indigeneity, the politics of belonging, the "ethno-contemporary," self-reflexive ethnography, anthropology's ontological turn, and observation of participation rather than participant observation.

Middleton aims to introduce ontological considerations of aspiring tribes to anthropology's concern. He looks at Darjeeling's tribal politics at the micro level and examines the idea of the tribe or the aspiration to be a tribe as a practice characterized by the constant interaction and mutual modification between human action and socio-material environment and its sociology, economics, and politics. At the meso level, he also conceptualizes tribal politics more as a contingency of wider social processes in which diverse practices of state ethnography, the politics of recognition, and the aporia to belong to India intersect with one another.

Middleton's reliance on overt anthropological methodologies such as detailed case histories, questionnaires, house-to-house surveys, note taking, keeping a diary, and the use of an assistant, informants, and photography enabled him to turn into an anthropologist who observed participation within a reflexive ethnography and empathetic empiricism rather than becoming a participant observer of the 'being native' variety. He

revealed his anxiety when the leaders demanding tribal status sought his endorsement on issues they were fighting for. He was equally perturbed by the repeated queries of the state anthropologists, who hunted his supposedly 'objective' consent while doing state ethnography. Middleton brilliantly explains these encounters to underscore the different modes of representing and knowing people that involved a continuous negotiation between subjectivity and academic distance. His account is reflective of such switch-positioning whereby a researcher is often repositioned as a participant rather than an observer to the participant-hosts, while at other times is an observer rather than a participant to his fellow colleagues, i.e., the anthropologists of the Cultural Research Institute (CRI) team.

It seems that Middleton is guided by the assumption that anthropological theory and ethnography are inextricably linked to each other and that making amenable the predicaments of doing field work in a self reflexive way leads one to prepare the foundation for critical anthropology. Within the limits of such discourses of critical anthropology—one that transcends anthropology from being merely a business of 'spectacularizing otherness' (Friedman, Jonathan. 1987. "Beyond Otherness or: The Spectacularization of Anthropology," *Telos* 71:161-170) to a discipline that



emphatically and self-consciously creates space between itself and ideas and practices that have become coextensive with an understanding of the world in all its thorny, complex taxonomies and contradictions—Middleton navigates more as a native ethnographer to come up with a commitment to engage in productive dialogue between persons inhabiting different societies and different political realities—most notably, the aspiring tribes, i.e., the Gurungs and Tamangs, and the CRI anthropologists. Throughout the book Middleton situates all possible subjects of contemporary tribal identity politics in the Darjeeling hills—the CRI anthropologists, the leaders of tribal identity movement, performers, general members of associations, and even his assistant Eklavya—within the limits of critical anthropology and shows how all of them coproduced anthropological knowledge. It is a valuable contribution to unpack the ethno-intelligibility of the way tribal identity is invoked in the popular imagination and how the recognition of that identity is worked out by the state machinery.

Middleton's concept of "ethno-contemporary" deserves brief discussion. Simply put, "ethno-contemporary" is all about the ways through which the present gets affected ethnologically (p. 18). Seen as such, Middleton's neologism has resonance with the context wherein the reader has to

situate the efficacy of the precept; otherwise one has only what Narmala Halstead would call an 'ethnographic present' (Halstead, Narmala. 2008. "Experiencing the Ethnographic Present: Knowing Through 'Crisis'," in Narmala Halstead, Erich Hirsch and Judith Okley (eds.), *Knowing How to Know: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Present*, pp. 1-20. New York: Berghahn Books). Halstead maintained that anthropologists experience particular forms of their ethnographic present, which contribute to changing understandings of anthropological knowledge. For Middleton, the ethnographic present is ethnologically ripe and is intertwined with the reflexive practices he elaborates throughout his study. Middleton's ethno-contemporary is suggestive of postmodernist possibilities that promise to engage issues like localism, distinctiveness, difference, identity and agency not as a timeless affair but actually as an intersubjective knowledge producing field that is both unsettled and unstable spatially and temporally. Ethno-contemporary puts significant light on the processes through which ethnologists work in the way communities encounter state stipulated terms of affirmative action. However, it would have been significant to know how the aspiring tribes conceptualized themselves as tribe, if they at all did so, before tribal identification in statist terms, as such a perspective would have influenced them. We know but very little

about the indigenous conception of tribe, if any, among the Darjeeling Mongoloids.

The formulation of the historical rootedness of the problem Middleton studied needs more careful handling of facts. For example, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) was established in 1988 (August 22) and not in 1989 (p. xix). While identifying the roots of Indian Nepali identity (p. 39) Middleton located its socio-cultural and affective substance in the role played by the Hill People's Social Union (founded in 1934) and All India Gorkha League (established in 1943). Both these organizations were undoubtedly important in shaping the Indian Nepali identity but both the organizations have followed a political route rather than a social-cultural one. The sociocultural basis of the Indian Nepali identity was perhaps mooted by Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (NSS, established in 1924). Conspicuously, the NSS, which perhaps played the most crucial and enduring role in preparing the cultural foundation of Nepali nation in India, finds no mention in Middleton's historical prognosis. The contributions of Kumar Pradhan, the most illustrious historian of the Darjeeling hills who has written extensively on these issues, are also missing in the otherwise exhaustive bibliography of Middleton's book.

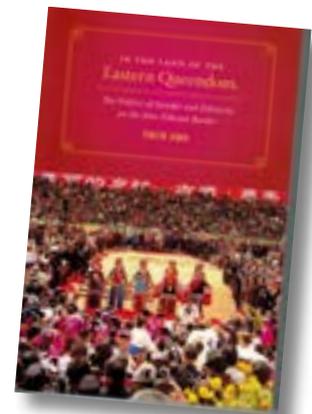
The ethno-contemporary is less about history, but without a grounded history any reflection on the contemporary

risks to be passing statements about the momentary present. This seems problematic in the way Middleton maps the trajectory of tribal movements and weighs it so heavily such that, according to him, it downsized the movement for a separate state known as Gorkhaland. The claim that the Gorkhaland movement failed (p. xix, 3, 46-7) seems to contradict his ethno-contemporary since one of the ethnologies with which the communities of the Darjeeling hills have become well versed with is the act of balancing. It is, however, not impossible to conceive of this balancing act as actualized by the Gorkhas or by the aspiring tribes who have one foot planted on tribal identity claims and the other foot on the claim of a separate state for the ethnic Gorkhas. Such courses of action can be framed in tune with what Middleton calls the ethno-contemporary, especially when we know that the claims of tribal identity are principally raised by the Mongoloid-*matwalis*. It deserves mention that to be a Gorkha and to be a tribe both as an idea and in practice are not contradictory to each other. Unlike Nepal, where the *janajati* upsurge might have emerged in contradistinction to the Hindu-Nepali identity, tribal identity in contemporary Darjeeling does not contradict Indian Nepali/Gorkha identity. Gorkha and tribal identities complement each other if the term Gorkha is more *matwali* oriented in the cultural sense and Darjeeling-India oriented in political terms. The social formation of Darjeeling is

different from Nepal and the trajectory of the *janajati* movement and tribal identity movement of both places are again markedly different from each other.

Overall Middleton establishes the urgency of developing a new conceptual framework to explore the concept of tribe and the process of tribal identification in the post-colonial period. We have been told decades ago about the colonial fixation of the term tribe in the context of India (Béteille, André. 1986. "The concept of tribe with special reference to India," *European Journal of Sociology* 27(2): 296-318). Middleton instead problematizes the concept of tribe as a postcolonial category and offers an engaged critique of late liberal logic of tribal recognition in India. Instead of suggesting any concrete steps as to how tribes in the post colonial period should be recognized in official terms, he cautions that wholesale changes—more in the Fanonian fashion of 'analyze and destroy'—in the tribal recognition process may be reckless and utopian (p. 223). However, the overall critique that he maintains throughout the book may prove to be helpful in offering some directions towards such a reformulation.

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In the Land of the Eastern Queendom: The Politics of Gender and Ethnicity on the Sino-Tibetan Border.

Tenzin Jinba. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014. 188 pages. ISBN 9780295993072.

Reviewed by Qiudi Zhang

Tenzin Jinba's book *In the Land of the Eastern Queendom: Politics of Gender and Ethnicity on the Sino-Tibetan Border* focuses its discussion on the Suopo community's claim of being a "legendary matriarchal kingdom" (p. 3). He begins his monograph by sketching the queendom dispute between the Suopowa and the Danbawa, who are both part of the Gyarong region, from where Jinba himself hails, that spans the Kham and Amdo regions in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (T.A.R.) and Sichuan Province in China. Similar to many other groups in the Himalayas, such as the Thangmi and the Humla peoples in Nepal, the Suopowa negotiate their group identity within both the Tibetan and PRC contexts for cultural and economic benefits.

In his book, Jinba presents how Suopowa's marginalized position in the Tibetan community in fact provides them with mobility and allows them to become 1) worthy Chinese citizens by cooperating with local party officials, 2) authentic Tibetans by claiming their dialect as the ancient Tibetan dialect, and