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Review of *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy* by Mona Chettri

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Book Reviews



Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy.

Mona Chettri. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 182 pages. ISBN 9789089648860.

Reviewed by Aadil Brar

For the greater part of the twentieth century, the academic scholarship on the eastern Himalayas has been restricted to the ethnographic study of different communities or an investigation into the history of contemporary borderland regions. Mona Chettri's *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy* is a first-of-its-kind book-length contribution on ethnicity and democracy in the eastern Himalayas; most specifically, it deals with the post-colonial and post-imperial periods.

This slim volume of 182 pages takes up the ambitious task of understanding contemporary identity

politics of democratic institutions in the eastern Himalayas. Chettri approaches the ethnocultural analysis of this region by exploring the intertwined contemporary history of both ethnic politics and democratic institutions in Darjeeling, eastern Nepal, and Sikkim. In the context of this book, the eastern Himalayas strictly include parts of Limbuwan in eastern Nepal, parts of North Bengal, and the political geography of modern-day Sikkim, even though the eastern Himalayas is an expansive geographical area incorporating parts of central Tibet, Kham, Bhutan, eastern Nepal, Sikkim, the Dooars, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. The three regions upon which Chettri focuses have, in her view, a shared cultural history influenced by the Nepali linguistic sphere. Yet they exist as disparate political units. Chettri argues that these three regions are experiencing a rejuvenation of ethnic identities—and hence the politicization of identities. This renewed interest in ethnicity is not just an interest in claiming a cultural identity but is also a political one.

The book sets out to articulate the concomitant revival of ethnicity as an expression of political identity and the rise of democratic institutions in the eastern Himalayas. Chettri argues that the shared cultural geography of the Nepali language in eastern Nepal, Darjeeling, and Sikkim creates an illusion of porous borders within the rigid political boundaries of regions and nation states. Chettri further

highlights that ethnic revivalism and an emphasis on the politics of ethnic distinction is now bringing eastern Nepal, Sikkim, and Darjeeling closer in an attempt to rediscover their past.

This book is informed by Chettri's lived experience in the region as one who is from the region and of Nepali heritage. This Nepali identity shapes the articulation of the Nepali cultural sphere in the eastern Himalayas. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, historical evidence, and secondary data, the book is rich in insights about contemporary ethnocultural history, but a deeper dive into her ethnographic interviews, which were conducted in rural regions of eastern Nepal, cities in Sikkim, and in parts of Darjeeling, would have further enriched the book.

In the context of Darjeeling, Chettri highlights that politics and identity are intimately intertwined—from making *duara suruwala* a mandatory attire by the Gurkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) during Dasain and Diwali to the assimilation of Lepchas and Tibetans into Gorkha identity. The GJM imposed the stricture formalizing a cultural dress to draw a strong cultural and political boundary between the Bengali inhabitants of Darjeeling and non-Bengali residents (including Nepalis, Tibetans, and Lepchas). In Darjeeling, Chettri argues that the idea of the brave Gorkha—a colonial construction—drives the narrative of reclaiming a broader Gorkha identity. Chettri summarizes the conundrum of

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Gorkha identity as the question about what Gorkha identity is not rather than what it is. The discussion in the book is timely, as the recent flaring of the Gorkhaland movement in 2017 revived the debate and violence in the region.

Scholarship on Sikkim as a post-merger political entity within India is still nascent but growing. This book makes a significant contribution to the movement that is trying to change that. Sikkim's geopolitical locale and unique history prior to merging into India have contributed to the contemporary evolution of its political identity. Chettri investigates the patronage-based system of ethnic and political affiliation that has emerged as a method of improving ones' social mobility. The proliferation of ethnic interest groups in the last three decades has been supported by urban elites seeking to promote the economic and political interests of their community. The overbearing influence of ethnic interest groups in Sikkim is evident by browsing through daily newspapers such as the *Sikkim Express* and *Summit Times*. Chettri's book investigates the reasons behind the mushrooming of ethnic interest groups. Notably, she identifies as the primary driver access to the public distribution system and employment opportunities controlled by politics of ethnicity. Public distribution system here refers to state-supply of food resources and basic essentials to the public. Sikkim's geography and terrain makes access

to food and other resources difficult. Sikkim's heavy reliance on state-sponsored employment opportunities has also contributed to a network patron-client relationship. The work opportunities are distributed on the basis of a quota system, which allocates a certain number of jobs for ethnic minorities and other groups. Since most jobs are tied to local government's activities, the ethnic groups have become advocates of their community to secure the special status or quota.

In a parallel to the events in Darjeeling, the Limbus of eastern Nepal have been in a tussle against the Nepalese state because of their resistance to the Gorkha identity and efforts to rediscover their past in order to claim an exclusive Limbu identity. Though the border between Nepal and India is porous, an asymmetric relationship exists between the two countries. Chettri traces the Kirati origins of Limbus and their subsequent Hinduization by Shah rulers. She also revisits the Janajati movement in the 1990s as the basis for the rise of ethnic groups that were trying to rediscover their Kirati roots. The basis of this movement was to resist the state-sponsored discriminatory practices that give precedence to Brahmin elites in Nepal. Chettri draws a parallel between Sikkim and eastern Nepal, where the state—both in Nepal and India—instituted policies that promote the well being of certain communities over others. Despite an international border between Nepal

and India, the ease of movement of people has both forged new alliances and promoted antagonism amongst Nepalis on both sides of the border. Chettri cites Article 7 of the India-Nepal Friendship Treaty as the basis for this asymmetric relationship. Article 7 gives Nepalis from Nepal right to own property, right to reside, to participate in trade and commerce and the freedom to move in India. Indian citizens of Nepali cultural heritage are uncomfortable with this article, as it dilutes their identity as an Indian citizen and makes them “a foreigner in their own country” (p. 52).

Another key contribution of the book is Chettri's finding that ethnic groups in all three regions argue that they have been left behind by the state and its public distribution system. The reason for their exclusion from access to developmental resources varies: for Limbus it is their Hinduization at the hands of the state; the Sikkimese attribute it to their history and affirmative action; and the Gorkhas in the Darjeeling region blame their territorial sovereignty.

The book's exclusive focus on “Nepali” as an ethnic category leaves the reader to speculate how other ethnic groups relate to each other within this eastern Himalayan geography. Though Chettri discusses the Bhutia and Lepcha communities in relation to Nepalis in Darjeeling, such an analysis for Sikkim and eastern Nepal is sparse.

Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland is an important contribution to improving our understanding of identity politics and the evolution of democratic institutions across the eastern Himalayas. This book lays the foundation for further academic scholarship on the formation of the public sphere and citizenship within and across the boundaries of nation-states.

Aadil Brar is a Digital Journalist at the BBC and a National Geographic Society Young Explorer. His recent research has focused on civil society institutions, ethnicity, and democracy in the eastern Himalayas. He holds an undergraduate degree in anthropology from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.