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Review of 'Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experiences' edited by Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram

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Shrestha... succeeds in illustrating the ritually-driven nature of not only Sankhu's calendar, but its identity and community.

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz on *The Sacred Town of Sankhu*

Shrestha's *The Sacred Town of Sankhu* nevertheless makes a significant contribution to the study of Nepal's Newars with an updated examination of Newar life and culture that builds on Gopal Singh Nepali's groundbreaking study entitled *The Newars* (Kathmandu: Himalayan Book Sellers, 1965) and Gérard Toffin's *Société et Religion chez les Néwar du Népal* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984). It brings together a wealth of data for scholars who are looking for specific information about different aspects of Newar society, culture, rituals, and festivals, and is particularly of interest for the attention paid to Hindu Newars, who now constitute the majority in Sankhu. Furthermore, this detailed account of Sankhu as a sacred town is a valuable resource that documents the constitution and workings of this ancient town in the modern period. While reading it, I was reminded of the characterization of Sankhu in Daniel Wright's 1877 *History of Nepal Translated from the Parbatiya* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1997): "Sankhu, which was once a place of some importance, but is now only noted for the religious ceremonies performed there" (p. 22). Shrestha demonstrates that Sankhu remains a place of import precisely because of its rich, vibrant religious heritage that is still central the town's identity, culture, and economic practices today. In his conclusion, he suggests "most

inhabitants of Sankhu will continue practicing their traditions despite the growing attraction of modernity and globalization" (p. 528). What will be interesting to see are the ways in which or degree to which modernity and globalization impact or alter the practice and so possibly the meaning or purpose of these traditions.

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her book manuscript (under contract with Oxford University Press) presents a comprehensive study of the local Nepali goddess Svasthani and the Svasthanivratakatha textual tradition. She is the Reviews Editor for HIMALAYA.

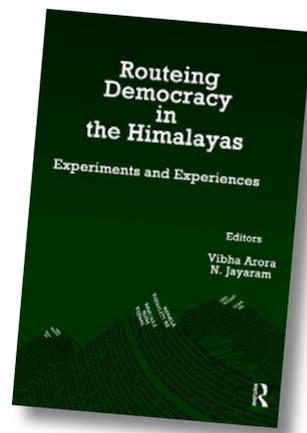
Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experiences.

Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram, eds.
New Delhi: Routledge, 2013. 303 pages. ISBN 9780415811996.

Reviewed by Luke Wagner

Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experiences is a collection of perspectives on the conditions of democracy in the Himalayas. As the first volume to focus specifically on democracy and democratization across the region, it is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature that insists that the politics of Himalayan states be taken seriously on their own terms and will be useful to any scholar interested in comparative or regional perspectives. As editors Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram point out in their introduction, the volume helps to clarify how democratization – and shared experiences of its unique character in the region – “stitches the independent Himalayan nations and Indian Himalayan states together into a distinctive regional political mosaic” (p. 8).

The volume is divided into two parts and consists of ten chapters, plus an introductory overview of democracy in the region. Four chapters focus on Nepal, three on states in Northeastern India, two on Jammu and Kashmir, and one on Tibetan democracy in exile. Substantively,



the chapters cover a range of topics, including historical influences on democracy in the region, contemporary repertoires of protest, the fragility of post-conflict politics, the effects of nature conservation projects, and the role of political parties in democratic consolidation. Taken together, the volume offers a rather tepid assessment of the state of democracy in the Himalayas. Although procedural democracy has been established across the region, it is hampered by the constraints of ethnic politics. Unequal access to socioeconomic and political resources, moreover, has left social democracy standing on weak legs.

The omnipresent role of ethnic politics in the region is a theme that runs throughout the volume. Gérard Toffin opens the volume with a critique of the ideology of the *adivasi/janajati* movement in Nepal, which he argues is grounded in “obsolete essentialist conceptions” (p. 35). His characterization of the movement’s ethno-federalist demands as “at odds with the premises of democracy” (p. 44) is echoed by Vibha Arora in her chapter, which traces the genesis and trajectory of “the paradox of democracy” in the eastern Himalayas and India’s Northeast: the institutionalization of democratic principles alongside their “negation” by ethnopolitics (p. 102). In an excellent chapter comparing ethnically-framed protests against development projects in Sikkim

and Meghalaya, Duncan McDuie-Ra illustrates the enabling and constraining effects of ethnic politics. His analysis supports Arora’s conclusion that much of the blame for the replication of ethnic politics lies with the central government’s policies (including constitutional provisions for Scheduled Tribes) and unwillingness to take seriously other modes of civic engagement. Focusing on a more localized level, Mona Bhan illustrates how ethnic politics often serve to further marginalize the smallest ethnic communities, as well as how such communities creatively deploy cultural capital in response.

In addition, the volume demonstrates that the challenges facing democracy in the region go beyond ethnic difference and that democratization is clearly not a linear process. Saloni Gupta argues in her chapter that democracy in Jammu and Kashmir at the time of independence was in much better shape at the formal, social, and participatory levels, but that the remainder of the twenty-first century witnessed the “liquidation” of social and participatory democracy in the state (p. 192). She illustrates her argument with two case studies of nature conservation programs: a ban on antelope wool (*shahtoosh*) that disproportionately affected the most economically vulnerable workers in the industry; and a Joint Forest Management Programme that not only failed to engender participatory governance, but actually depleted villagers’ social capital. Renske

Doorenspleet and Bal Gopal Shrestha directly address the “ebb and flow” of democracy in Nepal, arguing that an “actor-oriented attitudinal framework” (p. 245) facilitates analyses of democracy at different levels (elite, organizational, and mass). They use this framework to show that political parties in Nepal have been a major stumbling block to democratic consolidation as there is a low level of popular support for or trust in them, a high degree of intra-party fragmentation, and a low degree of accountability for party leaders. Similarly, Nel Vandekerckhove details the challenges of post-conflict politics in Assam, pointing out that it is precariously dependent on the Bodo People’s Progressive Front. The party is not only internally divided, but maintains links to shadow networks developed during the conflict, does not represent non-Bodo ethnic communities, and is itself financially dependent on the Assamese state government.

The volume does, however, contain some points of optimism. Most notably, in her excellent chapter on Tibetan democracy in exile, Fiona McConnell details the evolution of Tibetan democracy and the challenges it faces, arguing that it is “a positive story of democracy in the Himalayan region” (p. 204) that does not conform to prevailing theories of democracy. Perhaps most importantly, it is a case in which electoral institutions have been

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Luke Wagner on *Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experience*

deliberately designed to embrace historical regional and religious divides in order to facilitate a shared sense of nationhood.

The topical range of the volume is at once a strength and weakness of the volume. While it helps to drive home points raised in a number of the chapters related to the variability of democratic experiences – especially that democracy must be considered at multiple levels and from the perspective of multiple actors – it does not facilitate a coherent understanding of how democratization has unfolded across the region. Moreover, the treatment of ethnic politics is somewhat problematic in that the volume does not seriously address many of the grievances (real or perceived) to which the politics of ethnicity in the region directly responds. While a number of chapters point out that ethnic politics have become entrenched as a result of the policies of central governments, there are only brief nods to mainstream politics, which are infused with claims of their own regarding ethnicity– even if it they are not always overtly addressed and are occasionally overcome.

It is, of course, easy to criticize any volume for the things that it does *not* do, and we cannot expect any volume to do everything. What this volume *does* do is move the project of understanding democracy in the Himalayas

forward, and the good news is that the editors promise a sequel will follow soon.

Luke Wagner is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Yale University. He is interested broadly in democracy, development, and the relationships between religion and politics. His current research is on the role of debates about secularism in Nepal's ongoing political transition.