



Mona Chettri

# Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland

## Constructing Democracy

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# Asian Borderlands

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*Constructing Democracy*

*Mona Chettri*

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For my grandparents, Baba and Ama

**Figure 1** Map of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal



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## List of Acronyms

ABGL	Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League
AKRS	Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh
BGP	Bharatiya Gorkha Parishad
DGHC	Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council
GJM	Gorkha Janmukti Morcha
GNLF	Gorkha National Liberation Front
GTA	Gorkha Territorial Administration
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KYC	Kirat Yathung Chumlung
MBC	Most Backward Classes
MNO	Mongol National Organisation
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
OBC	Other Backward Classes
SC	Scheduled Castes
SDF	Sikkim Democratic Front
SSEC	State Socio-Economic Census
ST	Scheduled Tribes
VDC	Village Development Committee

## Glossary of Local Terms

<i>Agra-adhikar</i>	prior rights demanded by indigenous groups in Nepal
<i>Bikas</i>	development
<i>Busty</i>	village
<i>Chaplusi</i>	sycophancy
<i>Chakari</i>	giving gifts, running errands in order to seek favour
<i>Chaubandi-cholo</i>	wrapper and blouse traditionally worn by Nepali women
<i>Dasai</i>	annual festival celebrated by different ethnic Nepali communities
<i>Daura-suruwal</i>	traditional Nepali menswear
<i>Dhura</i>	blocks/area of land
<i>Hakim</i>	officer
<i>Jat</i>	caste
<i>Kaman</i>	tea-estates
<i>Kazi</i>	land-owning nobility in Sikkim
<i>Khukuri</i>	machete shaped knife used by most hill communities but symbolically associated with the Gorkhas of Darjeeling
<i>Kipat</i>	land-holding system of the Rai and Limbu communities in the eastern Himalaya
<i>Kirat</i>	speakers of the Tibeto-Burman language in eastern Nepal and Sikkim are collectively called <i>Kirat/Kiranti/Kirata</i> .
<i>Manghim</i>	Limbu temple
<i>Matwali</i>	alcohol drinking ethnic groups, which were placed below the Brahmins and Kshatriyas but above the untouchable castes in the caste hierarchy by Jung Bahadur Rana
<i>Palam</i>	song sung during traditional Limbu festivals
<i>Parbatiya</i>	people from the western part of Nepal, also the language spoken by these peoples
<i>Sarkari Jagir</i>	government employment
<i>Raikar</i>	a system of state-landlordism under the Rana regime in Nepal

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# Introduction

On most days, Anna Lepcha is commissioned to make Christian wedding gowns and ‘designer bakhus’<sup>1</sup> by her clientele in Gangtok, Sikkim.<sup>2</sup> On one of my visits to her boutique she showed me a ‘designer Rai dress’ that she had just finished for a local bureaucrat’s wife. Following the latest trend of glitter, sparkling beads, and exceedingly bright colours, the dress was a far cry from the plain prototype, which bore close resemblance to the traditional wrapper and blouse that had been worn by the Nepali women of the hills. I had started my research five years earlier and what struck me most was that in that time the Rai dress had acquired a new form, complete with sequins and vibrant colours, which made it easily distinguishable from other ethnic dresses.

Anna’s boutique is one of the numerous bespoke tailoring houses that have emerged in Gangtok and cater to a growing clientele for ethnic clothes designed with a fashionable twist. Smaller shops sell cheaper, wholesale versions of similar products, thereby making these items accessible to a larger number of customers. 10<sup>th</sup> mile road in Kalimpong<sup>3</sup> bazar is one such market, popular in the hills for locally produced items like noodles, incense sticks, silk scarves (*khada*), buck-wheat flour (*tsampa*), and hard cheese (*churpi*). Shops in this bazar are run mostly – if not exclusively – by Tibetan speaking Marwari businessmen who have harnessed this demand for ethnic clothes, jewellery, hats, and other items. Those who want more ‘authentic’ clothes or jewellery source it through friends, family, and retailers in Kathmandu.

The growing acceptance and display of ethnic distinction of this kind – especially through the wearing of clothes and other tangible cultural signifiers – is facilitated to a large extent by the close geographical proximity of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal. While it may be difficult to determine the point of origin and direction of these cultural exchanges, the political impact generated by these exchanges is almost uniform across the region: the manifestation of ethnic identity through clothes, cultural performances,

1 Traditional attire of Bhutia and Tibetan women.

2 Names of major towns remain unaltered but smaller towns and villages have been renamed and pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity of respondents.

3 Kalimpong in Darjeeling District, West Bengal, functioned as a thriving trade route to Tibet. It has strong historical and cultural connections with Tibet, which were strengthened with the settlement of Tibetan refugees in the early 1950s (see Harris et al, 2016). Khada (silk scarf), Tsampa (roasted barley and/or wheat flour), and churpi (cottage cheese) are closely associated to Tibetan social and food culture, which have now become a part of the food culture of the eastern Himalaya.

and architectural structures has become a key tool in the construction of group identities, which have been eventually converted into bases of political mobilisation.

Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal are located on the borders of the modern nation-states of India and Nepal. They are political borderlands of recent origin, being the result of the nineteenth century British legacy of colonial interventions in the history and geography of the region. The imposition of these rigid political boundaries by the British was in stark contrast to the conceptualisations of the border which had been present before colonial rule. Traditionally, the population of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal had seen borders as being fluid and defined by pre-existing culture, livelihood, and geography. As a result, the eastern Himalaya always has been – and remains – a cultural cross-road with a multi-directional flow of goods, ideas, and peoples. Cultural contact is a trans-border phenomenon, but with the ever-increasing evocation of ethnic claims on the state, the political border has finally come to play an important role in the defining of parameters of ethnic activism, the framing of achievable activist goals, and the formulating of an ethnic agenda which is recognisable within the context of a particular nation-state. Borders have always had a political purpose and in the context of the eastern Himalaya they are now imperative for the construction and enactment of ethnic politics.

The eastern Himalaya is a politically dynamic space and over the last decade identity based politics has emerged as a regional norm with groups – big and small – actively engaging in public articulations of their ethnicity. The contemporary pervasiveness of this form of politics can be attributed to the way that ethnic culture and traditions are able to cut across class, gender, and other political affiliations.

At the heart of regional politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal lies the Nepali ethnic group. The Nepali ethnic group is a trans-border, ethno-linguistic group whose history of migration, politicisation, and fluid intra-ethnic boundaries plays an important role in the contemporary political history of the region. Thus, without attending to the Nepali ethnic group one cannot hope to attain a nuanced understanding of regional politics on the periphery of modern South Asia. The citizens of the country Nepal are also known as Nepalis, but in order to avoid confusion over the usage of the term, I will refer to the citizens of Nepal as Nepalese and the term Nepali will be used to denote members of the ethno-linguistic group described above.

This book is set against this context of ongoing ethnic revivalism and concomitant ethnic politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal. The aim

is to bring into focus three interrelated issues pertaining to the politics and culture of the eastern Himalayan borderland. They are as follows:

- 1 This book will show that there is a transformation of ethnic identity into political resource and a concomitant re-drawing of cultural boundaries of one of most important ethnic groups in the region: the Nepali ethnic group. Being a Nepali in India or Nepal is not value neutral. Ethnic identification carries with it numerous advantages as well as impediments, which have percolated to different aspects of people's lives. One of the key functions of the Nepali ethnic identity, historically speaking, has been to ensure a better social, economic, and political position for at least a substantial sub-section of the group. Much of the contemporary political discourse in the eastern Himalaya can be interpreted as a continuation of this political ambition, albeit through the application of political methods that place emphasis on exclusive ethnic identities rather than on the homogenous group identity that had been constructed in the early twentieth century by literary elites in Benares and Darjeeling. The same ethnic group now exists within an increasingly globalised, neo-liberal economy and altered political institutions raise a different set of existential exigencies that political activists are seeking to resolve through identity-based politics. This has led to the establishment of ethnic politics as a regional norm as is demonstrated by the calls for official recognitions of ethnic categories. Moreover, this kind of ethnic politics is now sustained as a political movement through the upsurge in cultural revivalism, the proliferation of ethnic associations, and the success of ethnic political parties. Ethnic identity (like gender, class, or sexuality) is but one of the many forms of identity that is accessible to an individual as well as to the collective. As a result, no single identity may fully represent an individual. In this context, ethnic identity can be considered as a cultural segment of society that may also intersect with other identities (like class), which may then overlap again and reinforce one another (Rudolph, 2006: 8). In order to understand the development of an ethnic group's identity it is imperative to investigate not only the group's socio-historic circumstances, but also the power structures – both individual and structural – within which particular ethnic configurations have developed. Furthermore, one must pay attention to the mechanisms that are employed to sustain and strengthen ethnic identities (Barany, 1998). Identities are always in production, in a process which is never complete (Hall, 1990: 222). And they are invariably constructed in relation to the



identities of other individuals and groups, never in isolation (Barth, 1969). This is evident in the constant evolution in the meaning and form of ethnic identity itself, which occurs as the result of changes in the socio-political environment.<sup>4</sup>

It follows, therefore, that ethnicity in the eastern Himalaya, must be viewed as at once a historical product as well as one that is undergoing constant reproduction. Ethnicity and ethnic identity are subjectively felt senses of belonging and so must be understood by the function that they perform, especially in the propagation of group formation (Weber et al., 1978). Despite following different political trajectories, ethnicity remains the dominant variable in almost all political processes, development strategies, and in the functioning of the state machinery in the eastern Himalaya. As a consequence the development and consolidation of ethnic identities leads to an almost inevitable perpetuation of ethnic politics.

- 2 In this book I argue that this pervasiveness of ethnic politics is also an indication of the nature of the relationship between the state and the society. State policies give political actors a structural framework within which to express and enact their politics. In the eastern Himalaya, ethnic politics is played out within the leeway that is given by the state and is not typically aimed at de-stabilising or challenging the prevailing political structures. The state, therefore, creates certain incentives as well as dis-incentives that have facilitated the onset of ethnic politics. Ethnic identity is one of the strongest bases for collective action, but it does not derive its political efficacy simply because of primordial sentiments of kinship or belonging. Although these ascribed traits can be influential in galvanising mass sentiment and action, it is the material and symbolic incentives attached to certain identities that promote an instrumental approach to identity construction. In turn, the use of identity construction within the context of ethnic politics is taken

4 David Mosse (1999) presents an interesting example of the evolution of the socio-political usage of the identity of the Untouchable caste in South India. Beginning from the colonial times when these caste groups took on a religious identity (as Christians, Buddhists), Mosse traces how the changed political attitude and commitment of the state towards this group led to their metamorphosis into a bureaucratic and welfare category. This change in the form and function of ethnic identity is also evident in the three cases discussed in the thesis. Like the case of South Indian Untouchable castes that Mosse discusses, the ethnic identity of the Nepalis is also undergoing a serious change. It is slowly evolving from an ethno-linguistic group to a 'bureaucratic and welfare category', which homogenises cultural diversity into features that conform either to the national or international discourse on ethnic groups.

to be a direct response to the policies and politics of the state, and the manifestations of this relationship are at the heart of the considerations of this book.

- 3 Apart from institutional constraints and facilities at the local level, this book argues that the democratic approach as subscribed to by all modern South Asian nations provides very important parameters for political action. Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya is enacted within a framework that prescribes to democratic norms of mobilisation, participation, and most importantly the mandate of the majority. On one hand, this has led to a regional interpretation of democracy which makes use of ethnic affiliation as a resource for political mobilisation, a process which is dependent on essentialised representations of ethnic groups. On the other hand, this has given political agency to a wide spectrum of groups and individuals who could not otherwise have been considered as political actors within local and regional politics. Democracy and ethnic politics are engaged in a mutually sustaining relationship wherein democratic ideals of popular consensus building, adult franchise, collective action, and political representation provide a framework and give direction to popular ethnic sentiments. Democracy, in this sense, provides a legitimate outlet through which to articulate ethnic grievances and hence facilitates identity construction and politics within a geographical space that is replete with a diverse range of ethnic identities. In turn, this process makes democracy more inclusive and relevant in the lives of the people of the eastern Himalaya. This very process of identity construction and identity politics, however, has led to the evolution of a regional variation of democracy. This variation is dependent upon essentialised representations of ethnicity and has led to cultural revivalism and enhanced cross-border cultural exchange. What is more, it has facilitated the emergence of cultural elites as powerful political agents on the borders of regional South Asia.

### **Why Study the Eastern Himalayan Borderland?**

Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, is four hours away from Darjeeling and Ilam; eastern Nepal is less than three hours away from the India-Nepal border-town of Pashupati. These areas are well connected by roads; official borders are not heavily manned and there is a constant flow of people as well as both legal and illicitly traded commodities like alcohol, drugs, and

foreign goods. Bridges act as symbolic demarcations between these areas, but even as one crosses these bridges, a sense of familiarity and continuation persists. This could be attributed to the physical landscape that remains unaltered at political borders, but probably – and more importantly – it is because of the presence of the Nepalis and the Nepali language, which is the local language on either side of the international border between India and Nepal, and the regional borders between Sikkim, east Nepal, and Darjeeling. Common language, shared culture, and similar group identity lend to the illusion of an uninterrupted, seamless borderland that is disturbed only at times by political agitations that emphasise distinction and exclusivity based on territory.

However, political and administrative borders exist between these areas and are 'enacted' (van Schendel and Maaker, 2014: 4) at many levels and layers. Simple signifiers like difference in the price of alcohol (or eggs in the case of Sikkim-Darjeeling border), a mere change in the colour of the policeman's uniform, and the free availability of contraband items across the border, all contribute to people's understanding of borders and the formation of cognitive boundaries. This affects people's perception of themselves and their position in the world. And this perception has, in turn, had important repercussions for ethnic politics as it leads to the recognition of differences (mostly material) even within the same ethnic group.

Borders not only join that which is different, but also separate that which is similar (van Schendel, 2005). People with cultural and even historical similarities might live across borders, but the meanings that the local groups attach to these forms may not be identical (Donnan and Wilson, 1994: 103). Cognitive boundaries – based on economic, political, and national factors – have created layered identities amongst Nepali speakers in this otherwise ethnically contiguous area. Thus, the eastern Himalayan borderland has come to represent a complex socio-political space with multiple layers of cross cutting identities. This development has challenged traditional notions of ethnic homogeneity, stereotypical frameworks of pre-defined boundaries and loyalties, and simplistic understandings of the relationship between state and ethnic groups.

Political dissection of the geographical continuum of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and eastern Nepal reinforces a statist approach towards understanding the region, its people, and its politics. It therefore becomes imperative to re-frame our perspective and acknowledge the social, cultural, and political contiguity of the eastern Himalaya. Like many other borderlands, in the eastern Himalaya the shared condition of living on the peripheries of the nation-state and being subjected to the political and economic vagaries of

the centre has led to the formation of a very specific pattern of political culture that is unique to the eastern Himalaya. Many levels of interaction (kinship, religion, commerce etc.) are maintained between those living in the region, which provides a sense of stability and forms the foundation of interaction between trans-border residents (van Schendel, 2005: 57).

The state plays a deterministic role in the creation of naturalised links between peoples and places and, thus, narratives – especially of those related to the state and of common experience, history, and memory – function to bind people together and give concrete root to the social rules and framework within which all the actors in the borderland are embedded (Paasi, 1998). In Sikkim, Darjeeling, and eastern Nepal, this process is heightened not only by the presence of the same ethnic group on the either side of the border, but also by the existence of similar developmental and political grievances. The peoples subjection to regional alienation by the state thus becomes a catalyst whereby the people who share a remoteness from the centres of economic and political power develop a common bond. This, then, leads to the formation of numerous informal strategies to deal with the trans-border aspects of their lives (Clement et al, 2005). And this, in turn, has fostered a form of borderland politics that is dependent on very exclusive manifestations and politicisations of Nepali ethnic identity, which has then itself forced a serious re-conceptualisation of the region as a dynamic political space. As Baud and van Schendel (1997: 211) say, the practical consequences of the border are far different from the mental images of lawyers, politicians, and intellectuals.

The form and content of ethnic politics is, however, determined to a very large extent by the presence of tangible as well as cognitive borders. It is precisely because of the existence of intra-regional and international borders between Sikkim, Darjeeling, and eastern Nepal that there is a variation in the articulation of Nepali ethnic politics at all. The use of similar markers of ethnicity – albeit in different ways and for varied political and economic ends – unifies the eastern Himalayan borderland. Thus, while identity-based politics is a pervasive feature of the eastern Himalaya, it is one which is influenced deeply by the presence of borders- real as well as symbolic.

Identities, including their construction and eventual political mobilisation, do not exist in social, geographical, or political isolation. The confluence of territory, power, and the state is instrumental in issues of identity and cultural formation and application (Wilson and Doonan, 2012: 3). The regional politics of the eastern Himalaya, therefore, represents an extraordinary situation wherein the politics of exclusivity is located in an area of

intense historical and cultural interconnections. These three geographically and culturally contiguous, but politically distinct, areas represent the complex interaction between space, ethnicity, and politics. At the same time, the location of these three areas on the borderlands of their respective nation-states – and of the South Asian region in general – has a direct impact on the narratives of the state as well as on the ethnic response towards it. This, in turn, affects how ethnic groups in the borderland understand their position within the nation-state and how they mobilize themselves politically in order to engage within a democratic framework in the politics of the re-distribution of public goods and services. And this subsequently has given rise to a regional form of democracy that is constructed around and dependent on ethnic claims on the state.

The eastern Himalayan borderland is, then, a dynamic political space that warrants a movement away from generalisations, stereotypes, or romantic imagery. Instead, any conceptualisation of the eastern Himalayan borderland should entail a rigorous engagement with the political reality of the region. The borderland is a cultural and political crossroad where different forms of ‘everyday politics’ have made ethnicity an inevitable component of political discourse. As a consequence, the region merits greater scholarly attention, which acknowledges the political agency of the people from a more critical perspective.

### **Studying the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Same Same but Different**

This book has been shaped by a lifetime of observing the local and regional politics around me and even within my own extended family. It was my lived experience, then, that fostered my interest in the contradictions and questions around Nepali identity that has underpinned my doctoral research. I conducted ethnographic research in the hills and plains of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and east Nepal in 2010-2011. Fieldwork sites were guided by personal experience and knowledge of Sikkim and Darjeeling, while Ilam in eastern Nepal was chosen after extended research and interaction with people who had prior research experience in Nepal. Living, travelling, and working in different parts of the eastern Himalaya in the period since as a post-doctoral researcher has further contributed to the nuanced understanding I have of the people who live there and their politics. I travelled extensively throughout the region and crossed many national, international, and cultural borders in a bid to understand the importance of place and

identity. At a very subconscious level, I was perhaps seeking answers to the questions that had troubled me since I was an undergraduate student in Delhi. During my undergraduate years, being labelled and teased as a 'chinky' did not have the same effect as being mistaken for someone from Nepal. My attempts at clarification of my national identity felt inadequate. A lot of people could not locate Sikkim, my home state, on a map of India, and some others found it convenient to homogenise the Nepalis of India with the Nepalese citizens living in India.

At that time, a question arose for me for the first time: if we – the Nepali and the Nepalese – are so similar, then why do we feel different and what is the nature of that difference? Interaction with a wide range of people over the years in towns and villages of the eastern Himalaya has helped me understand that despite strong cultural, historical, and political connections between Nepalis of the borderland region, the crucial difference between them lies in their political motivation, agency, and action, which are determined by the national borders within which the Nepalis are located.

The primary aim of my work and engagement with issues in the eastern Himalaya has been to garner a holistic sense of the peoples and the place. As pointed out by Shneiderman (2015: 135), understanding the experiences of different ethnic groups calls for an engagement with 'not only the discursive production of literary journals but also ritual practices, cultural performances and other sorts of identity-producing public actions'. In order to engage with and understand the politics of the region completely, I engaged in as much community life and activities as I could; whether from joining picket rallies and accompanying wedding processions to attending local meetings, I tried my best to comprehend all the facets of everyday life in the eastern Himalaya. I conducted more than 120 in-depth interviews with respondents that included tea-plantation workers, activists, agriculturists, government officials, politicians, linguists, and shamans, to list but a few. Many interesting and insightful conversations took place in tea-shops, while walking to villages, on packed rickety buses, and more often than not in front of the kitchen fire. Being a Nepali myself, I was aware of the gender dynamics of the household and hence made a conscious effort to engage with female respondents. I was not, however, always successful, because most women either felt shy or stood in the background as I asked questions, and often assumed that they had inadequate knowledge or experience to provide answers to what I asked. Instead, my female friends, associates and respondents answered my questions in the best way possible by allowing me into their homes and lives, spending time with me and helping me understand the world from their perspective. As my fieldwork progressed,

I realised that it was always men who were at the forefront of political activities, while female participants were relegated to domestic roles (like distributing tea) in political meetings or functioned as passive participants in demonstrations. Most political parties had a women's wing (*nari morcha*), but they were devoid of any real decision making power. And despite the all-pervasiveness of ethnic politics and the claim to gender equality, politics in general still remained overwhelmingly dominated by men.

While my analysis of ethnographic data is an integral part of this book, this analysis is complemented by extensive historical research on the formation of the Nepali ethnic group as well as the contemporary socio-economic structures that influence Nepali politics. This inquiry is then combined with an analysis of the impact of other cultural factors in a bid to present a holistic account of the politics of being a Nepali in the eastern Himalaya. Still, it must be noted that this book is but an attempt to encapsulate the constantly evolving forms of politics and political agency as expressed by those living in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and east Nepal during a particular period of study. In the five years since my initial fieldwork there have been many changes in the political landscape. In Darjeeling, what appeared to be a strong pan-Nepali homeland movement has splintered following the creation of ethnic development boards by the Mamata Banerjee government (see Middleton, 2016; and Chhetri, 2016). In east Nepal, the Limbuwan parties failed to win any significant number of seats in the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections. These developments do not undermine the arguments made here, rather they support the argument that ethnic politics mobilises communities and brings them into the fold of democratic structures; even in rapidly evolving circumstances. Win or lose, mobilisation is achieved through ethnic politics.

In the eastern Himalaya, ethnic identity is more than a theoretical construct; it is an intrinsic part of life, a lived experience with strong ramifications. Ethnic identity functions as a social compass through which people navigate interpersonal relationships. It helps individuals to locate their position within the existing social, economic, and political paradigm. I am not exempt from this assessment of class, caste, ethnicity, nor from the norms of gender and social interactions, all of which can and did represent methodological impediments.

Every individual is a gamut of identities and the politics of the eastern Himalaya is a clear illustration of how social, economic, and political conditions determine which identities we make use of, and the nature and timing of this use. My adoption of one identity or another influence the way in which I had conversations with people whilst walking through the hills, valleys, and tea-plantations; the way that I made friends; the way that I was

invited to events and allowed inside people's homes, and much more. Almost as if to prove the that malleability of identity is a reality from the outset, my Sikkimese identity helped me initiate numerous conversations with the Limbus of east Nepal, especially with the populations of the northern villages who had previously crossed over to Sikkim to work in cardamom fields. In spite of my Indian citizenship, my ethnic background as a (high caste) Hindu Nepali made it easier for me to find accommodation in Ilam with a Newar family, and my *matwali* background<sup>5</sup> helped me integrate with members of the *matwali* communities (Rai, Limbu, Gurung) who took me under their wings and facilitated much of my fieldwork.

In Darjeeling, it was my Sikkimese identity – and not my caste or whether I was 'Aryan or Mongoloid' – that was more important in forming a perception of me as someone who coming from the land of 'development, peace and prosperity', would be unable to understand economic hardships. It was important – albeit difficult – to alter these perceptions about me, and it was only eventually achieved by listening and letting them know that I was trying to understand their lives. This was crucial in the development of my understanding of how people position themselves in opposition to others and how stratification based on class (which coincided with ethnicity) persists within societies which was not as pervasive in east Nepal. In Sikkim, it was neither caste nor class that played a determining role in the everyday lives of the people. Rather, it was the fine line between being able or unable to engage in formal and routinised process of knowing the 'right people' and gaining familiarity with the bureaucratic network that affected the people and my research the most. Most ethnic groups and their associations were represented by bureaucrats in Sikkim civil services. Speaking to them was crucial to my research and interviews would often be a long drawn out process built around formal codes of conduct and the idiosyncrasies of a particular bureaucrat.

These experiences bore testimony to the fact that identity ethnicity, gender, and class were very important but more so that identity was fundamentally malleable which then made them crucial political resources. This book is an account of experiences, relationships, and the everyday struggles and politics of the people living in eastern Himalaya.

5 In the caste hierarchy imposed by Jung Bahadur Rana, *matwali* were the alcohol drinking groups that were below the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, but above the untouchable castes. In spite of being a Chettri, one of the upper castes, I have mixed ancestry as my paternal grandmother belongs to the Magar ethnic group and my mother belongs to the Lepcha ethnic group.



All perceptions about a place and its people are influenced by representations in the existing literature. While ethnic identity featured prominently in literature emerging before and after Sikkim's merger with India in 1975, it had been studied only in its capacity as a cultural entity without any linkages to the economic and political world around it (see Das, 1983; Hiltz, 2003; O'Malley, 1907; and Rose, 1978). However, there is a marked trend in contemporary scholarship to take the use of ethnic identity to be a resource through which to understand the overarching structures of society. One strand of this literature interrogates forms of political negotiation between the state and the Lepcha ethnic group in order to further understand the imperatives for cultural revivalism within this group (see McDuire-Ra, 2011; Arora, 2007; Little, 2008; and Bentley, 2007). Other scholars have engaged with contemporary Nepali ethnic politics from the perspective of development, anthropology, sociology, and politics (see Chettri, 2015, Shneiderman and Middleton, 2008; Vandenhelsken, 2011; Sinha, 2006, 2009; Phadnis, 1986 and Gurung, 2010). These works contribute to a critical understanding of the, mostly cultural, mechanisms behind the resurgence of ethnic identity, and point towards the different motivations that encourage this development.

In the context of Nepal, recent political transition has brought identity politics to the fore, where gender and caste have again been pushed to the side-lines by ethnic issues. Ethnic politics is usually analysed within the matrix of economic determinism, and so highlights the discrimination towards ethnic groups in the hills and plains of Nepal by upper caste hill groups (see Lawoti, 2007; Bhattachan, 2008, 1995; Gurung, 1997). Moreover, a thorough investigation of Limbu ethnic politics is at this time inhibited by the limited literature on the region and on the Limbu ethnic group itself.

Susan Hangen's book, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal* (2010), and her other subsequent papers (2007) are pertinent to developing an understanding of regional politics, because they present an analysis of the Mongol National Organisation (MNO), one of the earliest proponents of ethnic politics in eastern Nepal. Although the MNO does not hold the same political relevance that it did in the early 1990s, they are still relevant to forming a clear conception of the origins of ethnic politics and its development to this day. Hangen charts their success and eventual decline to show the potential of ethnicity as a potent political resource that can be utilised at an opportune juncture in time, which is also one of the primary contentions of this book. Gregoire Schlemmer's (2003/2004; 2010) interesting articles on the re-invention of Kirat tradition are also highly relevant to the developing of an understanding of the kind of ethnic politics that has come to be associated with the preservation and even the re-invention of ethnic culture.

Schlemmer establishes an important link between culture and rights, and in so doing paves the way for a critical understanding of cultural production in eastern Nepal, which is at the heart of Limbu ethnic politics. In a similar vein, Sara Shneiderman's (2015), *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi identities between Nepal and India*, provides an intricate study of the cross-border lives and politics of the Thami/Thangmi ethnic group living in Nepal and the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya. As a nuanced study of experiences of migration, socio-economic exigencies, and cultural production, *Rituals of Ethnicity* provides an account of how the Thami/Thangmis have come to negotiate and re-construct their cultural worldview in a bid to adapt to the changing politics around ethnic identity. The book is an important contribution to the understanding of grassroots political movements and the different forms of agency that people have come to bear on the state and society around them. The book also undertakes a detailed discussion of the cultural lives of the Thami/Thangmis and especially the role played by ethnic associations in constructing an imagery of this ethnic group that would be acceptable to the state as well to its constituent members. *Rituals* highlights the different forces – institutional, historical, and ritual – that enable as well as disable ethnic identity formation. As an important addition to the literature on the eastern Himalaya, the nuanced study of the Thami/Thangmi ethnic group complements the wider focus of the present book as I consider the role of regional politics, ethnic associations, and the state as key drivers of ethnic identity formation.

While excellent sources on ethnicity and religion exist in the English literature (generally, not specific to east Nepal), most of these are inaccessible to the majority of Nepal's population outside of the Kathmandu valley who are more adept at reading in the Nepali language than in English. A much larger section of the population have access to books and articles written in Nepali or those books that have been translated into Nepali<sup>6</sup> (and now also in Limbu). Despite the lack of scientific enquiry regarding historical data and the tradition of oral history, books and novels hold great social and political value. The Limbu ethnic organization, *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung* (KYC), is at the forefront of the production of literature pertaining to Limbu history, culture, and tradition. They publish books, newspapers, and magazines

6 Lionel Caplan's 'Land and Social Change in East Nepal' was translated into Nepali in 2010. However, it was curiously titled as *Purbi Nepalma Limbu Jatiko Kipat ra Samajik Pherbadal*, which, when re-translated, means 'The *kipat* of the Limbus of east Nepal and social change'. This prompted speculations amongst local Limbu intellectuals about whether this was done intentionally to increase sales in east Nepal by tapping into the heightened ethnic sentiment that is strongly related to *kipat* lands.

that are related to Limbu history, culture, and society. Amongst the most readily available and popular books available in eastern Nepal are Iman Singh Chemjong's (1948), *Kirat Itihas* (History of the Kirat people), *Kirat Itihas ani Sanskriti* (History and Culture of the Kirat people) (2003), and the recently published *Limbuwanko Rajniti: Itihas, Bartaman ra Bhavishya* (The politics of Limbuwan: History, Present and the Future) by Bhawani Baral and Kamal Tigela (2008). While these literary sources play an important role in instilling a sense of ethnic history and pride, they also act as reminders of ethnic subjugation at the hands of a state represented by upper caste groups. Thus, these literary sources serve to strengthen ethnic activism and politics further. On a macro level, the Limbu ethnic movement is also a key example of the ongoing contestation against the state-led discourse on ethnic and national identity. The movement for ethnic homeland or Limbuwan has, therefore, been used as a source of statistics for violence and discrimination (Lawoti, 2007). However, this study of state-ethnic group relations at the macro level does not sufficiently account for the role played by the state or its extensions (like the bureaucracy) in the process of ethnic politics.

In the Darjeeling hills, the theme of the Gorkha as a martial race, ethnic discrimination of the Nepalis and the violent Gorkhaland movement of 1986 have long been the focus of Nepali scholars like T.B.Subba (1992, 1999) and Rajendra Dhakal (2009), as well as many non-Nepali scholars (Samanta, 2003; Chakraborty, 2000; Chattopadhyay, 2008). The majority of these articles take a descriptive, non-analytical approach to the Gorkha or the Gorkhaland movement and indulge in and promote homogenisation, reification, and stereotypes.

Contributing to a more critical understanding of ethnic politics in Darjeeling are works by Golay (2006), Middleton (2016), Chettri (2013), Wenner (2015) and Booth (2011). Booth's doctoral thesis, in particular, discusses the finer nuances of Gorkha language and identity. These works are instructive in the understanding of the Gorkha identity, and the insecurities and rhetoric that support the political movement that is dependent on this identity. Middleton (2011, 2013) and Shneiderman (2009) focus on different ethnic groups within the fold of the Gorkha category by concentrating more on the instrumental rationale of ethnic revivalism and interactions with the state that are also the core basis of the political movement around the Gorkha identity.

Thus, while ethnic politics and ethnic identity of the eastern Himalaya have both received a fair amount of academic interest, there is still a lacuna in the study and projection of this region as a political space. This book will fill that gap by investigating the relations between ethnic identity and other social, economic, and political aspects of eastern Himalaya life. Moreover,

most academic interest to date has been limited to specific areas in the Himalaya and so has not concentrated on the intersection and interconnectedness of geopolitically distinct areas, such as Sikkim, Darjeeling, and East Nepal. This book hopes to address this palpable dearth of cross-border studies by investigating the entanglement of ethnic identity relations from the perspective of the wider eastern Himalaya region.

## Facilitating Ethnic Politics in the Eastern Himalaya

In providing a broader contextualisation of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya, this book will also provide a more nuanced understanding of the regional politics in the area. One of the most important factors that affect the articulation and expression of ethnic politics is the state<sup>7</sup> and its bureaucratic extensions. The state does not determine ethnicity of course, but it does influence ethnic politics by either recognising or failing to recognise ethnicity as a legitimate basis for political organisation. The policy choices of the state are important, because they risk making prior ethnic divisions more permanent; promoting new mobilisations of formerly unrecognized groups; or even inciting latent ethnic nationalism through increased social interactions (Nagel, 1995). For example, in Sikkim, the State Legislative Assembly has specific representatives for the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, thereby accommodating ethnic politics and raising aspirations of other ethnic groups for political reservations. In contrast, the West Bengal government does not officially recognise the ethnic distinction of the Nepalis, most likely because they fear it would legitimise the demand for secession. As a response to this, the primary agenda of the Gorkhaland movement has been to establish cultural difference through the revival and display of the most visible aspects of Nepali culture (viz. clothes, customs). This approach was devised as an attempt to institutionalise the obvious ethnic difference between Nepalis and Bengalis. As Brown (1994) and Sambanis (2000) point out, if a state is unable to enforce its power or distribute resources amongst different ethnic groups equitably, it may only

7 According to Jessop (2007: 7), the complexity of the state begins, like ethnicity, with its definition, because there is no single theory or theoretical perspective that can encompass all its attributes. On the one hand, the state is just one of the institutional emblems among others within a social formation and, on the other hand, it is peculiarly charged with the overall responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of the social formation of which it is merely a part. In the context of the book, state here implies an institutional mechanism that is controlled by the executive and assisted by an extensive bureaucratic network.

agitate and rupture the social order, thereby creating ethnic discord which was non-existent before. One ambition of the Gorkhaland movement, then, was to make the inequity of state's treatment of different ethnic groups plain for all to see.

On the other hand, as a mediator and mobilising mechanism of minority symbols and interests, the state, as a part of the larger political system, also relies on ethnic strategies to secure its most favourable outcome (Parenti, 1967). The role played by the state directly (as evident in Sikkim) and indirectly (in Nepal and Darjeeling) cannot be overlooked in facilitating ethnic politics, but this is only likely to occur where the benefits the state will accrue outweigh the costs. The interaction between an ethnic group and the different extensions of the state is crucial because it has an impact on everything, from the aim and agenda of the ethnic group to the strategies of action by which members of different ethnic groups strive to achieve their various aims.

Rudolph and Rudolph (1987, 400-4001 in Mitra, 1991: 396) present a concise illustration of the state as perceived in South Asia. They write: 'when in western Europe, the state behaves very much as the "executive committee" of the bourgeoisie, the state in India, like the avatars of Vishnu, reserves for itself a multiplicity of roles of accommodation, extraction, production and repression, stepping in as the inevitable intermediary whenever the conflict between social forces became threatening to public order'. Embedded within these multiple roles and within the wide web of institutional mechanisms that is needed to support it, the state is able to act as a kind of structure that wields power and influence over the society. Thus development (understood as construction of roads, bridges, schools, social welfare, subsidies etc.) has become the most important component of all political discourse (Mitra, 1995: 396) leading to the aggrandisement of state power as that which controls all aspects of material development of a region.

The mere existence of an ethnic group and its grievances does not necessarily result in the political mobilisation of these groups or presence of their issues in political discourse. Writing in the context of Indian politics, Chandra (2005: 239) highlights the role that the state has in encouraging ethnic politics through its policies and practices of the re-distribution of public goods. According to Chandra (*ibid*), in such political systems the main route of re-distribution is through networks of patronage, such that individuals get ahead by either becoming a part of the state themselves and then obtaining control over the flow of patronage, or by cultivating ties with someone of influence at the state-level and thus becoming a consumer of state goods. In the second case, like the first, it is then possible for the individual themselves

to become distributors of patronage benefits. This patronage state system is, however, also influenced by the prevailing societal structure, which is itself a melange of social organisations rather than a dichotomous structure of centre and periphery. In this way, society constrains the state and transforms it through internal forces; but, at the same time, this process of constraint and transformation works in the opposite direction: from state to society. Thus, both states and societies should not be viewed as static formations, but rather as systems and structures that are constantly *becoming* as a result of a bi-directional struggle over social control (Migdal, 2001).

Politics of identity lies in the construction, articulation, and achievement of the goals set out by two primary agents of politics: ethnic groups and the state. Both of these agents are united by their use of ethnicity in their political agenda, but while the state uses ethnicity as a device to re-distribute resources – in effect creating and manipulating insecurities and structures of the society, ethnic groups and their representatives use arguments based on an ethnic rationale to bargain with the state for various concessions.

As will be discussed in greater detail later in this book, one should not take the aim of ethnic activism in the eastern Himalayan borderland to be guided by the desire to bring about change in the various structures that promote social, political, and economic discrepancies between ethnic groups, but, rather, to be guided by the desire to enable ethnic groups to have better access to the state and public goods. This kind of dialectical relationship between ethnicity and politics is sustained by an overarching structure that promises material as well as cultural benefits, and at the same time promotes the use of ethnic identity as a resource for political patronage. This has had important ramifications for the idea of a homogenous Nepali identity, thereby revealing the contested and malleable nature of ethnic identity which has made it an opportune breeding ground for political mobilisation.

The political nature of ethnic groups can only be fully comprehended by taking into account external factors like resource competition, immigration policies, political access etc., which play an important role in shaping individual and group choices, and in furthering the exploitation of ethnicity as a resource for political action. Concomitantly, the expansion and contraction of group boundaries and the essentialisation as well as revivalism of ethnic culture can be contextualised and understood as an instrumental response to changed political circumstance. From this perspective, the political nature of ethnic groups can be explained in terms of their aims to better facilitate access to or control over resources that are controlled by the state. Ethnic politics can then be seen as an interplay between institutional structures (at the local, regional, and national level) and the mobilisation

of ethnicity as a political resource by ethnic groups to buttress effective negotiation with the state regarding issues related to economic and political benefits as well as cultural recognition. This is a process which is guided by the over-arching and well established mechanisms of patronage.

The prevailing norms of behaviour between people and the state play a crucial role in framing expectations and approaches towards the state. Phadnis and Ganguly (1989) argue that the hierarchically structured social system brings with it a moral code that instills mutual obligations as one of the key prevailing norms of behaviour. What is more, they argue that this moral code frames expectations and approaches towards the state in South Asian societies, in essence determining what is and is not an acceptable relationship between the state and the society. Thus, elaborate systems of hierarchy and patronage maintain the worldview and everyday understanding of the relation between the state and its citizens that is endorsed by those holding power and authority.

This state sanctioned worldview has also percolated into people's everyday lives and, most disconcertingly, has come to have an influence on how people perform and function within a democratic system. Democracy can then be said to have been 'vernacularized'; that is, to have undergone a process by which the practice of democracy and the understanding of democracy have been moulded to fit local customs and notions of what the political sphere is (Michelutti, 2014: 642). This, in turn, has given rise to new forms of political agency in the region. The political systems of the eastern Himalaya have undergone a rapid transition and while democracy has been accepted as a legitimate and effective political system, liberal democracy is not always suited to states with a developing-democracy owing to the difference in their social and economic structure. Democracy will by its nature result in complex, heterogeneous movements that are supported by different social groups for different reasons. And without adequately developed political institutions, democratic selection risks becoming little more than a new allocator of power, rather than an exercise of popular will (Ake, 1995). Furthermore, the institutionalisation of democracy can be a problem due to short periods of democratic transition (Kohli, 1997: 327). Thus, when democratic ideals are introduced into societies with entrenched socio-political structures, it may be unable to challenge the pre-existing political norms and traditions, and so may not necessarily lead to decentralisation of power and empowerment of the local *demos*. One such example of new democratic ideals failing to overcome pre-existing political norms and traditions is the persistence of patrimonial hierarchies within society. The fact that these hierarchies continue to be prevalent in spite of

the establishment of democratic ideals results in a blurring of boundaries between the state, society, and markets; between formal institutions and informal networks; and between the centre and periphery. This kind of blurring of boundaries may result in tendencies of decentralisation, of corruption, and of political violence; and such tendencies may themselves offer regional elites access to strategic political positions to expand and maintain patrimonial political networks (Nordholt, 2003), a feature which may well be prevalent in 'young' as well as 'older' democratic nations.

In the eastern Himalaya, change and transformation of the political system has not matched the rate of societal transformation, thereby enabling ethnic identity to persist and prevail as a political resource even within a democratic framework. This persistence has been grounded in the interaction of ethnic identity with other influencing factors like economic growth, governmental performance, the status of civil society organisations, and other contexts within which ethnic divisions have been institutionalised (Beissinger, 2008; Chandra, 2005: 236). As Michelutti (2014: 641) writes, '... the moment democracy enters a particular historical and socio-cultural setting it becomes vernacularized, and through vernacularization it produces new social relations and values which in turn shape political rhetoric and political culture.' Ethnic politics can, therefore, be understood as a process which has led to a regional or rather a 'vernacular' form of democracy in the eastern Himalaya.

## **Organisation of this Book**

This book is based on historical data, ethnographic evidence, and secondary data pertaining to Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. In order to avoid potential complications in the structure and design of the chapters; to prevent repetition of ideas; and to preserve the clarity and focus of arguments, the chapters have been organised thematically. Each chapter is divided into subsections that focus on a particular area and within those subsections the treatment of theme/issue in the area under consideration is discussed in detail. It was not possible to locate the exact same phenomena, actors, or events in each of the three areas, which led to an internal diversity in how ethnic politics and democracy was experienced by the population of the eastern Himalaya region. This diversity is reflected very strongly in the book, but the lack of intensity or actors in one place should not be taken to invalidate the existence of ethnic politics or its contribution to democratic structures in the region.



The book is divided into five core chapters along with an introduction and conclusion.

Chapter 1 narrates the socio-political history of the Nepali ethnic group, a process of ethnic group formation which began in the Kingdom of Gorkha and culminated finally in Sikkim and Darjeeling. In order to understand contemporary ethnic politics, it is imperative to understand the cultural and political connections between different areas in the region from a historical perspective. The first section of the chapter, therefore, engages in an in-depth analysis of the history of migration and identity formation. The second section of the chapter discusses the contemporary political scene in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and east Nepal in order to provide a contextual background to the arguments presented later in the book.

Chapter 2 explores the socio-economic reality of the eastern Himalaya, which has had a crippling impact on the development of the region. This chapter assesses how development is understood in the region; determines what role the state plays in regards to regional developmental issues; and, most importantly, seeks to understand the ethnic framework through which development failures are understood and political sentiments mobilised.

Chapter 3 focuses on the political potential of ethnic identity. The key to success in ethnic politics is the creation of exclusive identities and ensuring its continued political relevance in public imagination and understanding. This chapter analyses how and why certain identities have come to be politicised and examines the factors that have led to their political ubiquity.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the idea of politicised identities to illustrate how they are presented in the public sphere and how the identities of different actors contribute to the manifestation of ethnic politics. The exploration and exploitation of material culture has led to ethnic revivalism and to the re-construction of ethnic identities in accordance to an imagery prescribed and/or accepted by the state and other external organisations. This is an important aspect of ethnic politics and is assessed in detail in the chapter.

Chapter 5 explores the crucial link between ethnic identity and democracy. Contrary to common perception, ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya works in tandem with the political institution of democracy. The chapter explains how this symbiotic relationship between democracy and ethnic politics has led to a regional interpretation of democracy that is more inclusive and relevant in the lives of the people of the region.

The Conclusion draws together the main arguments of the book, highlights the relationship between ethnic politics and democracy, and lays emphasis on the importance of changing the perspective through which the eastern Himalaya is assessed and analysed.