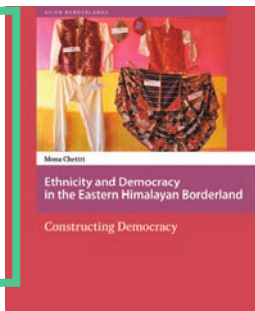


Constructing democracy

Mélanie Vandenhelsken



Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland is one of a number of recent books on the formation of ethnicity in the present-day eastern Himalayas, notably including Suresh Kumar Gurung's *Sikkim: Ethnicity and Political Dynamics – A Triadic Perspective* (Kunal Books, 2011), Townsend Middleton's *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling* (Stanford University Press, 2015), and Sara Shneiderman's *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Mona Chettri's monograph focuses in particular on the situation of the 'Nepali' in east Nepal, Darjeeling, and Sikkim – whose role, she argues, is central to the understanding of regional politics (p. 14) – and dwells on the transformation of Nepali ethnic identity into a political resource and a base of political action. The author analyses this process in the light of the combined influence of the state – or more accurately, the people's view of the state – and of the connections and interactions between the three geographical areas under discussion. The transborder perspective adopted in the book is based on the people's experience of the region as a 'cultural cross-road with a multi-directional flow of goods, ideas, and peoples' (p. 13). The author also advocates a reframing of the perspective of the region as a set of bounded areas linked in particular by kinship, religion, etc. (pp. 18–9), as against a 'political dissection' of the areas in the region that 'reinforces a static approach' to its people (p. 18).

The monograph concentrates on unravelling the conditions of existence of the ethnic 'frame' (defined on pp. 95–6) of political action and inequality in the region: how it has been given life and strength by the function and dysfunction of both the Indian (in Darjeeling and Sikkim) and Nepali states and how it unfolds in people's views and practices. Although the greater part of the book focuses on the ways this ethnic 'frame' has been deployed and is

Reviewed title

Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy

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maintained through views and practices, the first part describes the historical construction of the ethnicisation of politics in the region. In this chapter, the starting point of the process of construction of the 'Nepali' is located in the Gorkha conquests (18th century), which led to the formation of an unequal access to sources of production, or of a 'tributary mode of production' (p. 41), based on the Hindu hierarchical principles, in particular the institutionalised economic and cultural domination of high castes over 'Adivasi/Janajati' or 'tribes'. Chettri argues that this was one of the main factors of outmigration of non-Hindus towards Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The book then further clarifies the direct link people make between empowerment of their ethnic community or the making of an 'ethnic homeland', and political and economic emancipation. It discusses in detail the emergence and various expressions of people's view of economic and political inequalities as an outcome of ethno-cultural domination, more particularly of high Hindu castes in Nepal, and of the majority population in India.

The comparison between the three regions highlights contrasts and continuities in the part played by the states in nourishing the process of ethnicisation of politics (and of politicisation of ethnic categories). Nepal and West Bengal have in common the absence of the state in people's daily difficulties, and the pervasiveness of clientelism, leading

to economic insecurity – which people nevertheless attribute to ethnic discrimination in Nepal, and to 'socio-political subjugation by the ethnic other' in Darjeeling (p. 79). The author argues that Sikkim stands outside this pattern, as dependency rather than the politics of discrimination fuels ethnic politics there (p. 84). Another important point made in the book is that the ethnicisation of political categories and action does not run counter to democracy, but is today an instrument for negotiation with the state, and more generally allows the formation of political agency and the collective mobilisation of ordinary people in the Eastern Himalayas, as Susan Hangen had shown for eastern Nepal (*The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, Routledge, 2010, Chapter 5).

The strength of this book is that it gives a clear understanding of the main debates and questions concerning a number of points on ethnicity and its construction in the region – to give only a few examples: the role of state policies in differentiating Nepali in India and in Nepal, the centrality of ethnic belonging in political struggles and collective action, the role of the state in the development of claims focused on ethnic categories – which also shows the prime interest of the comparison between the three areas in adding comprehension to this topic. Interestingly, the author's fieldwork – which unfortunately is rather too briefly described – provides the basis of her analysis through highlighting the 'ethnic framework' which people give to their economic and political situation. Throughout the book, this 'framework' is unfolded through the lens of the local people before being analysed by the author.

On a more critical note – if such is needed for a book which, generally speaking, is both intellectually fulfilling and displays a sound theoretical basis – ethnic politics in Sikkim is described as mere instrumentalism (pp. 110–16), and unlike the approach the author adopts elsewhere in the book, as well as for her treatment of Darjeeling and East Nepal, it omits any account of the way in which recognition as one of the categories framed by the state (Scheduled Tribe, OBC, MBC, etc.) functions for people as a means of compensating a past history of political domination (cf. here Marc Galanter's analysis of the Indian reservations policy as 'compensatory discrimination' (*Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*, University of California Press, 1984); the transposition to Sikkim of the narrative, which developed in Nepal, of domination by high Hindu castes, is thus deserving further scholarly investigation. In addition, more extensive

ethnographic description of both rural areas and the agents of the state would have allowed the author to reveal the gap between the discourses maintained by politicians, state anthropologists and activists, and actual common practices and ideas. Concerning Sikkim itself, the author's analysis of the situation in terms of ethnic 'fragmentation' (p. 131) – which is actually a political statement based on the idea that the term 'Nepali' labels an historically and ethnically cohesive group, as much as the political class wanted them to be politically – contradicts her demonstration in other parts of the book of the flexibility over time of the inner and outer ethnic boundaries of the category of 'Nepali' and its internal diversity and heterogeneity.

This point highlights a difficulty faced by all researchers on this region, namely the need to maintain critical distance and to deconstruct the ethnic categories built by the people themselves. In Chettri's monograph, the people of focus are called the 'Nepali ethnic group' (for example p. 117), whereas the book also provides the elements allowing for a deconstruction of this label. This problem pertains for all ethnic categories, but is particularly acute when speaking of a composite one, as it would be with the terms 'Mongoloid' or 'Kirant' as used in present-day political discourses. The view of Nepali as an ethnic group reflects the Nepalis' own endeavours for more than a century to establish cohesion and solidarity in order to be recognized as full-fledged citizens in their place of residence. However, for the sake of analysis, a distinction between the category as viewed by the people and the researcher's own category could be made. One might wish here that research on this area could find a way to adequately express people's claims for recognition and fight against discrimination, while also maintaining analytical distance from the categories created as part of these political struggles; this would also allow further discussion of the lack of alternative categories and forms of citizenship other than the ones promoted by the state.

Nevertheless, this book is a major contribution to the knowledge of the eastern Himalayas, above all because it lays the foundations for a new approach that foregrounds the experience of this region by its inhabitants as a space connected and shared across state borders and territorialisation.

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Sunshine across the sea?

Niels Mulder

Mistaken by the book's title, I expected to review a comparative study. The subject matter, however, is Filipino migration to Japan in contemporary times, and the complex issues this entails. It is this entanglement that is hinted at in the idea of 'thinking beyond the state' as, until recently, studies of migration were held hostage by the role of the state and its policies in the process. With the shift to transnational approaches, however, other actors, such as the migrants themselves, migrant organizations and networks, came to the fore. Consequently, in the present collection of contributions, migrant agency receives its due.

The editor/contributor, Johanna Zulueta, introduces the subject matter with lucid, albeit very condensed, observations on the complicated questions the book addresses, at the same time she provides the reader with historical data about the movement of people between Japan and the Philippines. In this regard, we are informed that, as of December 2016, Filipinos – almost a quarter million of them – rank as the third largest group of immigrants, next to Chinese and Korean nationals. In

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contrast to this stood the then mere 17,021 Japanese nationals in the Philippines.

With their focus on the experiences of Filipino migrants, the nine author-contributors present us with the wide range of pressing issues these migrants are facing. In doing so, the limits of state-centric discourses become obvious, and by 'thinking beyond it', the various authors problematize contemporary migration processes. Substantially, their contributions have been thematically divided into three main parts – Challenges to Policies; Agency in Structure; Communities and Integration.

The challenges consist of a review of immigration policy in contemporary Japan; the policy failure of the Japan–Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement regarding the healthcare workers' migration scheme, which notes the low passing rate of Filipino

nurses in the national licensure examinations; the issues and concerns of Filipino domestic workers to Japan; and the impediments on reaching human security for migrants. From the very titles, it is already obvious that all these contributions can recommend no more than utopian policy solutions.

The part on agency highlights migrants decision-making regarding staying in or leaving Japan; issues of child upbringing and citizenship of the offspring of mixed marriages; the perspectives of Japanese–Filipino youth, while noting the importance of Japanese nationality as cultural capital; and how Filipino rap music by Japanese–Filipino youth can serve as a strategy for visibility and acceptance.

The last part relates the role of Migrant Support Organizations in the process of migrant integration through social bonding,

bridging and linking; and the inflow of and its consequences for Filipinas working as entertainers in the big city, highlighting the role of the Filipino Migrant Center in facilitating communication with other, often undocumented, Filipino migrants, the locals, and the local administration.

Whereas the editor claimed that Japan–Philippines migration is well and alive as an object of interdisciplinary study, she also points to subjects that have so far eluded attention, such as aging Filipino migrants, Filipino entrepreneurs and highly skilled migrants in Japan, Japanese educational migrants and Japanese retirement migration to the Philippines. As the latter drew my attention as missing, I inquired about the result of the Philippine Retirement Authority's long-standing effort in attracting Japanese retirees. The result is not world-shaking, as the Philippine Retirement Authority informed me that a mere 2,223 Japanese retirees had currently availed themselves of the privileged Special Resident Retiree's Visa status (March 2019).

Be this as it may, I still quote Professor Mina Rocas's preface observation, "This is a very important seminal study that will be a major contribution to the robust field of Filipino migration studies. In addition, the research findings have implications for future policy-making and underscore the need for transnational approaches to migration that, as the book's title suggests, 'think beyond the state'" (p.xii).

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