INTERPRETING DEMOCRACY: ETHNIC POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYA

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Introduction

The surge of cultural revivalism, demands for ethnic homelands and affirmative action policies based on ethnic affiliation evince the establishment of ethnic identity based politics in the eastern Himalayan borderland where most political contestations are now made on the basis of ethnic claims (see Caplan 1970; Subba 1992, 1999; Sinha 2006, 2009; Hangen 2007, 2010; Vandenhelsken 2011). Ethnicity and ethnic identity may have emerged recently as conceptual categories, but they have always formed an intrinsic component of the lived experiences, history, politics and culture of the region and what contemporary politics particularly highlights is the malleability with which ethnic identity can adapt itself to changing political environments.

Ethnic identity is understood as a synthesis of ascribed traits combined with social inputs like ancestral myths, beliefs, religion and language, which makes ethnicity partly ascribed and partly volitional (Joireman 2003). It is socially constructed, subjective and loaded with connotations of ethnocentrism which can be detrimental for modern state building. If subjective criteria determine ethnic group formation and politics, democracy provides a wider base of socio-political collectivity that goes beyond kinship, religion, language etc. This in turn enables popular consensus building amongst a wider spectrum of people than a kinship group. Despite this basic distinction, democracy (understood as adult franchise, formation of political parties and freedom of political thought and action) and ethnic politics co-exist without any apparent contradiction in a region where democracy has been introduced fairly recently as a replacement for monarchical, feudal or colonial systems.

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 recently democratizing states owing to the difference in their social and economic structure. This renders democracy a complex, heterogeneous movement

supported by different social groups for different reasons. Democratic selection then only becomes a significant allocator of power rather than an exercise of popular will (Ake 1995). Also, institutionalization of democracy can be a problem due to short periods of democratic transition (Kohli 1997: 327). Thus, when democratic ideals are introduced in societies with distinct socio-political structures, it may be unable to challenge pre-existing political norms and traditions and may not necessarily lead to decentralization of power and empowerment of the local demos. One such continuity is the persistence of patrimonial hierarchies which can result in the blurring of boundaries between the state, society and markets, between formal institutions and informal networks and between the center and periphery. This may result in tendencies of decentralization of corruption and political violence and 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.

Thus, 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 has been enabled by the interaction of ethnic identity with other influencing factors like economic growth, governmental performance, the status of civil society organizations and other contexts within which ethnic divisions are institutionalized (Chandra 2005: 236; Beissinger 2008).

This fusion of a new political system and older, traditional patterns of state-society relations has led to local interpretations of democracy. Inherent in this form of regional democracy is its capacity to politically empower a wide spectrum of people at the local level and act as a mechanism through which socio-economic grievances can be addressed effectively. This challenges the perception that the continued framing of political discourse through ethnicity will lead to the dilution of democracy by perpetuating non-democratic forms of participation like patron-client relations, prevention of other forms of mobilization based on class, gender etc. Further, this fusion illustrates that while ethnic identity has infiltrated almost all of the existing democratic practices, it neither creates an 'out-bidding effect'[1] nor

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[1] Ethnic out-bidding represents a situation wherein the politicization of ethnic divisions inevitably gives rise to one or more ethnic parties which in turn, leads to a spiral of ethnic bids that destroys competitive politics (Chandra 2005: 235).

de-stabilizes democracy but has, in fact, helped establish democracy as a political culture by making it inclusive, accessible and relevant to people.

This paper is an interrogation of the relationship between democracy and ethnic identity politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal and proposes that ethnic politics represents a regionally specific form of democracy. The paper discusses the way that socio-economic grievances are transformed into ethnic grievances in order to facilitate political mobilization and deeper engagement with the state. In this process, discussions and debates are framed around ethnicity but are presented and deliberated within state approved democratic practices. In the eastern Himalaya, ethnic identity is one of the most important and powerful bases for political mobilization and while its ability to attain desired political outcomes is debatable, what ethnic politics has led to is the further entrenchment of democracy in the region.

In this region, the institution of the modern state has been superimposed upon a historical social system which was characterized by inegalitarian relationships between different groups of people distinguished not only on the basis of their ethnicity but also their access to material wealth. This inequality, whether originating in the feudal relations in Sikkim and Nepal or in the exploitative colonial capitalism in Darjeeling, has been deeply internalized by all sections of the society. This has led to the institutionalization of historical inequalities and anxieties that have now gone on to form the 'macro-habitus,' which is made up of a group's position in the world economic system, international regimes and of course their position within the nation. This is an extension of the Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' which refers to groups' 'dispositions' or internalized norms, understandings and patterns of behavior which are clearly different from one another (Bourdieu 1977). These factors are all socially reproduced over generations and inform people's perception of their position and status in the political field which in turn are the bases of political movements.[2] The macro-habitus contributes to the creation of different sets of stimuli and responses which ultimately leads to a variation in the enactment of democracy across the region. Thus the political identity of a Nepali from east Nepal is not transferrable to a Nepali living in Darjeeling. Likewise the idea of a Gorkha, although familiar to all Nepalis,

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[2] I use the word 'movements' with caution here as all three cases are not equally representative of political movements which are generally understood as collective action with a specific purpose. While Darjeeling and Nepal do highlight these aspects quite prominently, it is rather diffused in Sikkim.

will not have the same political resonance amongst the Nepalis of Sikkim and the Nepalis of Nepal. Despite the difference in identity construction and the impact of the macro-habitus, the three areas share two important features – firstly, each has witnessed rapid political transition and secondly, ethnic identity remains a pervasive feature of regional politics in all three.

This paper explores the conceptual framework of this regional form of democracy and is informed by extensive ethnographic data collected in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal.[3] The paper is divided into three sections. Section one illustrates the transformation of the prevailing socio-economic grievances into ethnic grievances. Section two examines structures that facilitate ethnic politics and the third section discusses different aspects of regional democracy. Section three is divided into two sub-sections. Sub-section one analyzes frames, political mobilization and inclusive politics and sub-section two highlights the roles of ethnic parties and vote banks that further the cause of democracy in the region.

Transforming Socio-economic Grievances into Narratives of Ethnic Discrimination

Transition to Democracy

Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal share a common history of culture and religion but fall under different political and administrative jurisdictions. Sikkim is one of the constituent states in the federation of Indian union with its own legislative assembly and an elected head of state; Darjeeling is a district within the state of West Bengal and has its own administrative set-up called the Gorkha Territorial Authority, although finance, security and land is controlled by the Kolkata-based state government; Ilam is one of the seventy-five districts of Nepal and owing to the centralized, unitary organization of the state, economic and political power as well re-distribution of goods and services is controlled from Kathmandu. Ilam district is further divided into Village Development Committees (VDCs) which are engaged primarily in administrative functions and very little decision-making is done at the VDC level. Despite the difference in their political status, the realpolitik in these three areas evidences political contention based on Nepali ethnic identity

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[3] Ethnographic data was collected in the eastern Himalayan region over a period of seven months in 2010–2011 as a part of my doctoral research.

which has manifested itself most prominently through ethnic revivalism and demands for ethnic homelands.

These three areas are also sites undergoing political transition. Nepal has a history of experiments with different democratic forms dating back to the fall of the Rana regime in 1951. Attempts at establishing a functioning democracy had been thwarted time and again by the presence of a powerful monarch, splintering of political parties, unstable coalition governments and the decade long Maoist insurgency which ended in 2006 (Brown 1996; Hachhethu 2003, 2009; Whelpton 2005). In 2008 the monarchy was abolished and the drafting of a new constitution is underway which is intended to guide the restructuring of Nepal. However, there is very little clarity over the specific mechanisms through which this massive change will be achieved (Shneiderman and Middelton 2008).

Similarly, Darjeeling had been under colonial administration from 1837 and was not fully integrated with West Bengal although it had been nominally a part of the state since 1866 itself (Subba 1992: 29–36). Democratic ideals were not an organic development especially amongst the disenfranchised colonial subjects and the immediate replacement to colonial rule was domination by political parties. Thus, the transition period from colonization to a democracy was very brief thereby leading the electorate to associate democracy with single party domination, strategic alliance building, ethnic voting and political violence.

In Sikkim too, the transition from monarchy to democracy was very short. The traditional feudal system that existed under the Namgyal dynasty was replaced by a democratic system through a pro-democracy movement in 1975 (Rose 1978). Elections based on the parity system[4] had been introduced by Chogyal Tashi Namgyal in 1953 which further consolidated the position of the monarchy and traditional land owning nobility. After a short political movement led by pro-democracy activists, the first democratically elected government was established in 1973 under L.D. Kazi, and in 1975, in an

[4] The parity system which had been established by Chogyal Tashi Namgyal in 1953 led to creation of the Bhutia-Lepcha seats in the State Council. Parts of this system is still retained and in Sikkim the Bhutia-Lepcha community, although it belongs to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category, still contests elections and has reservations under the Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) category. This is an anomaly particular to Sikkim which is protected by Article 371F of the Indian Constitution and thus in the Sikkim State Assembly there is reservation of seats for the BL community.

emergency session, the State Assembly passed a resolution abolishing the institution of the Chogyal and declared Sikkim to be a constituent state of India (Kazi 2009: 40).[5] However, there has been very little alteration in political practice. Between 1979–2014 there have been only two full-term Chief Ministers in the state both of whom have enjoyed absolute majority in the state legislative assembly (*Vidhān Sabhā*) during their terms.[6]

Thus, while democratic practices like the formation of political parties and casting votes may have existed in Ilam, Darjeeling and Sikkim for some decades now, it is still an ideology that will take time to be firmly established in societies which are only recently emerging from undemocratic political systems and where the transition period may have been significantly short. The structure of the state and other political institutions have changed but the understanding of the functions of these institutions and what is expected from them remains influenced by cultural norms. This has a serious impact on state-society relations which ultimately shapes the democratic landscape.

Ethnicity and the State

Unemployment, poverty and lack of infrastructural growth, considered as developmental failures, are a few of the existential problems affecting the lives of those living in the eastern Himalaya. However, development is usually understood as a generic expression for a series of mostly government sponsored activities pertaining to social welfare and rapid economic growth, which then ultimately become the leitmotif of political discourse (Mitra 1992: 396). Lama (2001) highlights the tendency amongst people in the region to believe that 'development is government, government is development.' This leaves the onus of development primarily on the government and the belief that development is the prerogative of the government only enables the state

[5] Sikkim first became a British Protectorate in 1890 and in 1950 the Chogyal signed a Treaty with India which made Sikkim a Protectorate State but after the Sino-India war of 1962, Sikkim's strategic importance was duly recognized by India and during the anti-Chogyal agitation of the early 1970s, India lent full support (diplomatic as well as material) to stage Sikkim's peaceful merger with India (see Das 1983).

[6] Nar Bahadur Bhandari (1979–1994) and Pawan Kumar Chamling (1994–present). However, there were two other caretaker governments also. B.B. Gurung was the Chief Minister for 13 days in 1984 and Sanchaman Limboo was the Chief Minister for six months in 1994 after the downfall of Bhandari government. In 2014 general elections, Sikkim Krantikari Morcha won ten seats from the east district leading to the presence of an opposition party in the legislative assembly for the first time in over two decades.

to wield an enormous amount of power over them. The state plays a vital role in the allocation and distribution of public goods and services and is therefore also the target of public grievances for either its failure to deliver developmental outputs or the unfair, unequal distribution of public goods.

For instance, according to The World Bank, with a per capita income of less than US$ 750, Nepal remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 157 out of 187 countries[7] and the presence of the state, albeit limited, is the strongest and most visible in Kathmandu and weakest in peripheral areas like Ilam. Away from the *sadarmukām* (district headquarters) rural areas suffer from a near complete absence of roads, electricity and services like adequate healthcare, education and security. These places also suffer from disparity in information, access and control over regional and national issues thereby increasing the extent of the transition that one will have to make in order to be a complete participant in the political process. This increases the perception of the capital city as not only being geographically distant but also far removed from the problems of its rural citizens.

The majority of the people in the eastern hills are engaged in agriculture or small business because of the difficulty in securing a *sarkārī jāgir* (government employment). One of the most important repercussions of the lack of *sarkārī jāgir* has been the out-migration of young men from villages to larger towns and cities in Nepal or to India and the Middle East. There is an explicit understanding that while unemployment remains the biggest problem faced by the population, it is one that is exacerbated by a bureaucratic structure that can be neither understood nor negotiated without *āphno-mānche* (one's own people). While the unitary system with its well documented lack of accountability (Adhikari 2007: 145) is seen as promoting inefficiency; bureaucracy and corruption are at the heart of under-development. When combined with unemployment, socio-cultural factors like *āphno-mānche* and *cākarī* (sycophancy) are thus deemed as important factors contributing to illiteracy, socio-economic backwardness, unemployment, etc. by acting as filters for the upward movement of the different sections of the society and impediments to accessing public goods.

A similar situation exists in Darjeeling where under-development and economic deterioration of the district is the source of frustration with the state. Darjeeling featured in the Indian Planning Commission's '100 most backward Districts' (Aiyar 2003: 21) where 18.1 percent of the population

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[7] See www.worldbank.org/en/country/nepal/overview; accessed 4 May 2014.

lived below the poverty line (BPL) and 5.3 percent of the households went hungry (Debroy and Bhandari 2003: Appendix 145). However, the *West Bengal Human Development Report 2004* ranks Darjeeling district with the second highest per capita income (IRs. 18,529) after Kolkata (GoWB 2004). This irony can be attributed to the increase in the trade commerce and real estate investment in Siliguri[8] and the profits of the tea industry which do not trickle down to the large majority of workers who live in poverty (rural poverty rate is 19.66 percent and urban poverty rate is 15.21 percent) [GoWB 2004: 80].

The conspicuous absence of the state is marked by the problems that people have to face on a daily basis. Investment in social services like health, water supply, sanitation and infrastructural development is negligible. While small health posts are scattered on the hillside, there are a handful of hospitals in major towns which are not equipped to handle complicated cases thereby necessitating any medical emergencies to be transferred to private nursing homes in Siliguri, at least for those who can afford it. While tea estates remain the biggest employers, this industry is marred by low wages and minimal social security benefits (see Besky 2008; Chettri 2013). Tourism is another source of employment for the local people but because it is restricted to only a number of areas, its impact on local employment opportunities is limited. This problem is compounded by the fact that Darjeeling district has the highest rates of literacy in the state of West Bengal. Darjeeling faces a serious problem of unemployment amongst the educated. All of these circumstances prompt men and women to migrate either to neighboring Sikkim or to other Indian cities in search for employment in call centers if educated or as domestic servants, nannies and assistants in beauty parlors, if uneducated.

On the other hand, Sikkim with its organic farms and eco-tourism is projected as India's success story in the north-eastern region. The infrastructural development and connectivity visible in the rural areas of Sikkim at best masks the poverty which is pre-dominant in the state owing to the decline in agriculture, unemployment and the concomitant dependence on the state for the provision of basic necessities. In Sikkim more than 19.33

[8] Siliguri is strategically located on the border of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It connects the Indian mainland to north-eastern India. Apart from being one of the fastest growing commercial cities in West Bengal, Siliguri has also historically been a center of both official as well as black-market trade in various foreign consumer goods from Thailand via Bangladesh and from Nepal (Ganguly-Scarse and Scarse 1999: 267).

percent of the population live below the poverty line (BPL) and 40.91 percent of the population have a monthly income of less than IRs. 5000 (GoS 2006: 18, 20).[9] Given that poverty in Sikkim is highly regionalized (highest in the western district followed by the north, south and finally the east) poverty is experienced most acutely amongst the rural poor.[10] According to the 2001 census, there are a total of 128,843 households out of which 109,955 or 85.3 percent are in rural areas (GoS 2006: 21). Meanwhile it is the capital and other district towns that are the beneficiaries of most of the development as visible through the affluent lifestyle of the residents of Gangtok. In Sikkim the state has sought to remedy poverty through the provision of goods and services thereby encouraging dependency upon the state. Although based on the notion of de-centralized bureaucracy, the distribution pattern of public goods is highly politicized because it is the political representative, either the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly, *Vidhān Sabhā*) or the member of the panchayat, who is finally responsible for the re-distribution of goods and services which is used to maintain political allegiance.

While the persistence of such grievances is rampant in most economies, the distinguishing feature in this region is the use of ethnic identity as a political resource through which to engage with the state. Re-distribution of economic and political goods has firmly been etched as the guiding framework, motivation and necessary end of all political activity in the Himalayan region, and Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal are no exceptions to this trend. In this model of politics, the state has complete access to and control over these goods which are then re-distributed on the basis of certain (often subjective and politically influenced) criteria. In the eastern Himalaya, this re-distribution is affected by the ethnic identity of the recipients leading to inequitable distribution or complete deprivation of these goods. Modes of negotiation with the state differ on the basis of political and geographical location, as well as the various regional, national and international

[9] All figures are quoted from the State Socio-Economic Census (SSEC) [GoS 2006] report which is the latest available set of socio-economic indicators. The 2013 report is still being compiled and is yet to be published. The SSEC (2006) has based its definition of categories like poverty line and below poverty line on a combination of methods like Income Perspective, Expenditure Perspective and Basic Needs Perspective. To measure the socio-economic status of a household, their assets, properties like land, income and household monthly expenditure were taken into account (GoS 2006: 7).

[10] According to the SSEC (2006) the highest number of BPL households are in the western district (26.54%) followed by south (24.38%), north (18.65%) and east (13.45%) [GoS 2006: 21].

structures around them. However, the state is seen as assuming a distinct ethnic character which has an impact on the form and content of political negotiation. Arguments over legitimate access to public goods are presented as cases of denial of ethnic rights, thereby linking ethnicity to the political contestation surrounding the amelioration of socio-economic grievances.

Thus, when the denial of and access to rights is articulated as being dependent on ethnic identity, political agency is also expressed in ethnic terms. In Nepal, *Bāhunvād* or Brahmanocracy is an openly recognized and acknowledged cultural feature whereby resources (public or private) are captured or controlled by the two upper caste groups thereby limiting the representation of other groups and severely affecting their life chances (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfuss 2003: 6). Correspondingly, the administrative system is seen as an extension of this high caste monopoly, designed to control or prohibit access to other groups. This forms one of the most important bases of grievances against the state in Nepal thereby making state-led ethnic discrimination the root of under-development and poverty and its corresponding cycles of illiteracy and unemployment, which has resulted in a demand for a separate federal unit of Limbuwan, a homeland of the Limbu ethnic group, through state restructuring. In Darjeeling, the lack of development is seen as symptomatic of the non-acceptance of the Nepali community by the Bengali-dominated administration. The state is therefore seen as supportive of the forces that maintain political status quo and is perceived as restricting control and access to economic and political resources in their own area. The relationship between Kolkata and Darjeeling is viewed as an unequal one between a center and periphery, based not only on economic deprivation but also on ethnic discrimination, which is perceived as a reflection of the national prejudice against Nepalis in India. All these socio-economic grievances are strongly presented and understood through an ethnic framework which has been manifested explicitly through the movement for Gorkhaland, a homeland for Indian-Nepalis. In Sikkim, ethnic articulation of socio-economic grievances is a result of affirmative action politics that has been institutionalized by the state wherein benefits are accorded to different ethnic groups on the basis of their recognition as a particular socio-economic category such as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other

Backward Classes (OBC), etc.[11] This therefore creates very narrow modes of accessing the state leading in turn to the emphasis on harnessing the potential for ethnicity as a political resource in order to partake in the distribution of desired goods and services.

Structures Facilitating Ethnic Politics
International Organizations

It is not the mere existence of grievances that leads to the politicization and eventual mobilization of ethnicity but also the impetus and the favorable environment provided by external political institutions like international donor agencies, funding bodies, etc. Thus, the transformation of socio-economic grievances to ethnic grievances has been accelerated through 'enabling structures' which are a product of a broader engagement with international bodies like the United Nations (UN) Organization and other international non-governmental agencies which can strongly influence the framework around which a country's state-minority relations are organized. For instance, even before the second *jana āndolan* in 2006, international agencies like the UN had already made inroads into Nepali politics. The celebration of the UN Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 renewed ethnic activism among nascent ethnic organizations. In the same year debate on the ethno-politics of language intensified as the government formed a commission to make recommendations about the national language policy (Bhattachan 1995).

The state plays a central role in the determination of an identity as well as the extent to which a particular ethnic group is successful in achieving its goals. This relationship may seem to be a direct consequence of local/

[11] **Table 1: Socio-economic Categories and Reservation Policy Applicable in Sikkim**

Ethnic Groups	Socio-economic Category	% of Reservation in Employment
Lepcha	Primitive	5
Bhutia	Bhutia-Lepcha (BL)	20
Limboo, Tamang, Sherpa	Scheduled Tribes (ST)	13
Rai, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, Mukhia, Dewan	Most Backward Classes (MBC)	20
Bahun, Chettri, Newar, Sanyasi	Other Backward Classes (OBC)	20
Kami, Damai, Sarki	Scheduled Castes (SC)	7

Source: Government of Sikkim, Notification no. M (14)/45/GEN/DOP-Pt.-III

regional factors but given the increasing pace of globalization and the interconnectedness of economies and peoples, international organizations like the UN can strongly influence the framework around which a country's state-minority relations are organized. While pre-independence India had a basic framework of recognizing ethnic diversity, in the erstwhile kingdom of Nepal it was only after the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990 that the state made slight concessions towards different ethnic groups. The unitary, centralized state follows an accomodationist approach which has only aggravated socio-economic grievances further. One of the most important developments in the *Ādivāsī/Janajāti* movement was when Nepal became the first country in South Asia to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in 2007, recognizing fifty-nine groups as ethnic/indigenous thereby legitimizing ethnic identity and the politics around it and making the ethnic movement in Nepal a part of the global indigenous movement.

In Sikkim and Darjeeling the Indian discourse on ethnic/indigenous groups follows an integrationist approach[12] in response to the international indigenous discourse as promoted by the UN. This has institutionalized affirmative action and forms an important part of understanding the rights and benefits attached to an ethnic category, with the ST status being valued over all the other statuses. The state as the prime distributor of resources has become the point of appeal for arbitration and appeasement and the labels of ST (in India) or *Ādivāsī/Janajāti* (in Nepal)[13] reflect efforts made by the state or the ethnic groups themselves to use ethnicity as a political resource and to partake in the redistributive system. Thus, based on national guidelines either of accommodation (as in Nepal) or integration (in India), stakeholders such as ethnic associations, political parties and interest groups mold their agendas and activities around the state.

[12] An accomodationist approach entails some form of territorial autonomy combined with official language and customary rights, institutional pluralism and the integrative approach focuses on civil rights and non-discrimination. The former seeks to accommodate diversity through minority-specific institutions, while the latter seeks to integrate all citizens on a non-discriminatory basis into national institutions (Kymlicka 2007: 1).

[13] According to respondents in Nepal, *Ādivāsī* was understood as meaning indigenous while *Janajāti* broadly meant ethnic groups. Thus in an ethnically demarcated Nepal, a particular ethnic group could be an adivasi or indigenous in a particular area and a *Janajāti* in another. For example, the Limbus would be *Ādivāsī*s in the proposed Limbuwan and *Janajāti* in neighboring Khambuwan.

Political Opportunity Structure

According to Eisinger (1973: 12) the political environment, a generic term used to refer to different aspects and elements of formal political structure, imposes certain constraints on or opens avenues for political activity. Thus, the manner in which groups in a political environment behave is not simply a function of the resources that they command but also of the openings, weak spots, barriers and resources of the political system itself. This concept, also known as political opportunity structure (POS) has played an important role in elevating the status of ethnic identity as a political identity and has been defined by Sidney Tarrow (1998: 18) as

> the consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action. The concept of political opportunity emphasizes resources external to the group unlike money or power – that can be taken advantage of even by weak or disorganized challengers.... The most salient changes in opportunity structure result from the opening up of access to power, from shifts in ruling alignments, from the availability of influential allies and from cleavages within and among elites.

In Nepal, political transition was been catalyzed by the Maoist insurgency, the demise of the monarchy and the promise of a new constitution. All of these factors have contributed to making the assertion of an ethnic identity, rather than the state-endorsed national identity, feasible and has enabled the pursuit of economic, social and political equality. Ethnic politics helped articulate inequality and differential power relations and offered a means of challenging them. Although the agenda of major parties still dominates debates and discussions in the country, it is an achievement in itself that the 'ethnic question' is at least being discussed at the national level. While transitional politics of state restructuring and ethnic homelands might have provided a fertile ground for Limbu nationalism in Nepal, in Darjeeling, it is the change of leadership (from that of Subhash Ghising to Bimal Gurung), endorsements from national leaders (like Jaswant Singh)[14] and other homeland movements in India, especially the Telengana movement, which have revived and

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[14] The rationale behind electing Jaswant Singh (a veteran politician from the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP], a national, right-wing party) from Darjeeling during the 2009 Parliamentary (*Lok Sabhā*) elections was that of national exposure of the Gorkhaland cause. The BJP was also seen as more sympathetic towards demands of smaller states as the states of Jharkhand and Uttarakhand had been formed under the BJP government (both in 2000). In June 2014,

strengthened the demand for Gorkhaland. The stronger the movement, the deeper the infiltration of identity. Indeed, ethnic identity has become the only effective vehicle of political action obliterating caste, class or gender as effective bases of collective political action. Thus, the Gorkhaland and the Limbuwan homeland movements have provided the political motivation necessary for the popularization and strengthening of respective identities. In Sikkim on the other hand, the change in the political sphere through the electoral victory of an ethnically inclined political party led to a change in the attitudes and aspirations of the majority of Nepalis of Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), led by Pawan Kumar Chamling, favored socio-economic categories (e.g., Other Backward Classes [OBC], Most Backward Classes [MBC]) as a means of social classification along with reservations and subsidies which were instrumental in increasing the appeal of ethnic distinction over the homogenous Nepali identity. As the Indian state introduced more reservations and subsidies for various groups, especially the Scheduled Tribes, ethnic identity became more attractive as a platform from which to access the state. This highlights the potency of ethnicity when used as a political resource a fact which was realized only when there was a chance for structural changes (in the form of a new government) and there were real, material benefits attached to it which enabled the formation of new patronage ties in order to access these benefits.

POS has not only legitimized ethnicity as a political resource but also diversified the means of political assertion, thereby expanding the democratic base. Thus, a combination of external factors and existing internal grievances has facilitated the legitimization of ethnic identity as a political resource whilst simultaneously ensuring the further entrenchment of democratic practices. On the one hand, this instrumental use of ethnic identity has given a platform to different ethnic groups to engage in a dialogue with the state, while on the other hand identity-based politics has also helped to ensconce democracy as a permanent political feature in the region. The ubiquity of ethnic identity has led to its infiltration of almost all of the prevailing democratic practices, whether it be political mobilization, formation of political parties or vote banks.

Telengana became the 29th state of India. It was carved out of the state of Andhra Pradesh following a homeland movement that began in 1969.

Regional Democracy
Frames, Political Mobilization and Inclusive Politics

Ethnic identity is one of the strongest bases of collective action and political mobilization is a crucial aspect of democracy. While ethnic issues may have resonance in the social, religious and cultural lives of the society, ethnic identity also performs the latent function of mobilizing people for a range of political actions, from active participation in social movements to making electoral choices on the basis of ethnic considerations. While traditional political agents (like elites, religious heads, members of political parties) are still primarily engaged in mobilization, the prolific success of ethnic politics has also opened space and opportunity for a new strata of elites as well as new forms of social capital. This has enabled a large section of society to engage in democratic politics, making democracy in the eastern Himalaya more inclusive. This challenges perceptions of how identity-based politics is used instrumentally to dilute democracy but on the contrary it promotes inclusivity and a degree of political empowerment to those who have not traditionally been political participants.

Taking the lead and capitalizing on this situation are ethnic associations which act as important bridges between the political and the social realm in functioning as effective mobilizers of grass-root communities. The boundaries between the social and political fields are highly blurred as ethnic activists engage in and support activities that are explicitly political, providing further evidence of how cultural rights are seen as a natural component of economic and political rights and vice versa. In Nepal, the importance of this political juncture has been well captured by Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC or the Chumlung, hereafter), the foremost Limbu ethnic association which was also one of the earliest advocates for the state of Limbuwan, at least on an organizational level. As a firm proponent of ethnic homelands, the Chumlung believes that ethnic language and culture can only be preserved in a homeland[15] and that without political rights there can be no cultural rights.[16] The Chumlung plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of Limbu identity, which fuels the demand for the social and political recognition of the Limbus. The presence of international humanitarian agencies has led to greater awareness of ethnic/indigenous

[15] Executive member of the KYC, Central Committee; Interview; 22 September 2010, Kathmandu.

[16] Executive member of the KYC, Ilam chapter; Interview; 3 September 2010, Ilam.

rights amongst ethnic elites, which when combined with their potential to disrupt life through strikes and sit-ins, especially in the semi-urban and border areas, has made them formidable political agents.

Ethnic associations have also made a foray into politics in Sikkim. Over the past ten years Sikkim has seen an unprecedented growth in the number of ethnic associations representing Nepali ethnic groups both big and small.[17] This is a result of the creation of a socio-political framework by the state which is conscious of and receptive to ethnic identity and its tangible markers. Ethnic associations exert control over the cultural aspects of ethnicity and its usage by recognizing some cultural elements over others and thus promoting their own approved form of ethnic identity. As a result, most ethnic associations are engaged in revivalism of ethnic language, religion and other tangible markers which can then be utilized to negotiate with the state to bestow their ethnic group with benefits commensurate with a particular socio-economic category. In Sikkim ethnic associations do not have to negotiate with the state for recognition or socio-political space. It is rather a request for a share of the privileges that is being provided to other groups with similar cultural features. The increasing receptivity of the state, highlighted most prominently through its affirmative action policies, has led to a change in the demands of the established associations from that of socio-economic benefits to political representation (as in the case of the Limboo and Tamang Associations) and the demand for the declaration of all MBC categories as ST. These demands for political reservations also highlight the transition of ethnic demands from socio-cultural to political demands expressed through the associations.[18] Both the state and ethnic

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[17] According to the Commission for Review of Environment and Social Sector, Policies, Plans and Programmes Report (CRESP 2008, Annexure F), eighteen ethnic associations submitted their memorandum and ethnographic report out of which fourteen of these ethnic groups belonged to the Nepali group. The ethnic groups are: Bhujel, Chhetri-Bahun, Damai, Tamang, Gurung (Tamu), Kami, Kirat/Khambu/Rai, Limboo, Mangar, Newar, Sanyasi, Sarki, Sunuwar and Thami.

[18] For example, the Limboo-Tamang Joint Action Forum has been especially pertinent in promoting its demand for political reservation in the Legislative Assembly, placing memorandums to the Chief Minister but also to the President of India in 2008. This has been possible not only because of their combined strength but also because individually they are well organized associations with a network of members who are highly placed in the governmental bureaucratic network. While the primary demand of most of these associations relates to the attainment of ST those who have already been declared as ST now aspire for the proportionate political representation in the state legislature.

groups have recognized the value of ethnicity as a political resource that can be used as a negotiating tool. This in turn has informed and shaped the cultural imaginings and political demands of ethnic groups, thereby leading to an assertion of identity that is different from that in Nepal or Darjeeling.

The political assertion of ethnicity owes its foundation to the work of ethnic associations at the central and regional level. In urban areas, this has revived curiosity amongst the young and instilled *jātīya* (ethnic) pride in the old as people no longer find it embarrassing to wear traditional dresses or speak in their native languages. It has also increased participation in cultural activities. This wider acceptance of culture, socially as well as politically, has also created an opportunity for ethnic elites to make a foray into local level politics. Ethnic elites, who previously identified themselves only through their affiliation to political parties are now renewing and asserting their ethnic ties and culture in order to take advantage of the political situation which has now become receptive towards ethnicity. Thus, this situation has given rise to a new layer of elites who are influential probably not because of their position in the political party but rather because of their influence and standing within their community. Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalayan region has facilitated the admission of a wide spectrum of people with a variety of social capital as important political agents thereby augmenting local forms of political agency.

The enactment of politics in the eastern Himalaya has not only made ethnicity a viable political resource (mostly for access to economic and political resources) but it has also led to the political mobilization of those groups and identities which had previously remained dormant. Politicization is an important aspect of the mobilization of a population towards involvement in democratic politics and in the eastern Himalaya this has been achieved through the effective use of ethnic frames of reference.[19] Following Goffman (1974) 'frames' have been defined by Snow *et al.* (1986: 464) as schemata of interpretation that enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life spaces and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experiences and guide action, whether individual or collective. This has a fundamental role in the three cases in the eastern Himalaya, where the

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[19] Politicization is an attempt to define the ethnic group and the markers of membership to it, which can then be used for the mobilization of peoples in support of deliberately cultivated values and of representing them to the world according to a consciously created image (Dasgupta 1999).

framing of issues and events by different actors leads to the variation in the articulation of ethnicity. Local, regional and national frames inform the nature and conduct of everyday politics. Frames do not emerge naturally but are carefully constructed by leaders and elites in order to mobilize or demobilize a community. In all the three areas, poverty and social backwardness are framed as direct consequences of belonging to a particular ethnic group. The key to economic emancipation of the Nepali ethnic group, therefore, lies in an approach which calls upon the state to facilitate the development of specific ethnic groups.

In Nepal, the inability to make useful patronage ties and partake in the re-distribution of goods and services has a real and serious impact on the lives of the people and while this could also be identified as a failure of the state, it is instead understood as an extension of ethnic discrimination by the state. The state is seen as supporting systematic ethnic discrimination and the resultant economic disparities offer further explanation for the population's intense feeling of neglect and obvious contempt against the state. Discrimination and perceptions of it are therefore based on distance from Kathmandu. More importantly, the ethnic framework as popularized by ethnic associations and political parties has given an ethnic form to social, economic and political grievances. In Darjeeling, the state is seen as engaging in discriminatory practices and hence influencing the form and content of political mobilization. Thus, insecurity over land, lack of control over resources and the frustration at the general apathy of the state administration has found voice through an ethnic movement rather than one based on class owing to the existence of powerful ethnic frameworks and socio-political figures like the *bīr* Gorkha, which are more potent in galvanizing popular support than any class-based identity.

The demand for Gorkhaland bears close resemblance to demands for ethnic homelands in Nepal as a remedy to the social and economic discrimination meted out by the state. However the idea of Gorkhaland is distinct to that of Limbuwan because Gorkha as an ethnic category has emerged more out of common social, political and economic exigencies than simply homogenous cultural features, kinship systems or other primordial understandings of ethnic groups (like the Limbus). The Gorkha is an ethnic group in so far as it satisfies a sense of common belonging; a sense of shared history and most importantly acts as a base for political action.

In Sikkim on the other hand, this framing of ethnic groups as deprived and marginalized is framed more for the use by the state than by the people.

Here, the 'marginalized, backward groups' discourse is used by the state in the redistribution of goods and services and eventually used to retain its popularity with the electorate. Recent ethnographic reports by ethnic associations represent ethnic groups as having 'animistic, tribal features' (Sinha *et al.* 2005) and the economic plight of the community is presented as a consequence of being a tribe rather than a result of poor governmental policies or representative of failed development. Although in all the three cases poverty prevails irrespective of ethnic identity, ethnic framing makes it easier for the people (who also appreciate the cultural revival brought on by identity politics), the elites and the government to comprehend and compartmentalize people in order to attain political outcomes. This has led to greater interest and participation in democratic politics, which were earlier controlled by political parties. Ethnic politics has widened the opening for political participation through its endorsement of cultural revivalism which immediately lends political agency to a wide spectrum of people with a variety of social capital. Thus, ethnic democracy facilitates a convergence of the political aspirations of a variety of political actors and promotes greater inclusion as well as the conversion of socio-economic grievances into ethnic grievances which in turn leads to an alternative way of negotiating with the state.

Ethnic Parties and Vote Banks

Madsen, Nielsen and Skoda (2011) make a succinct connection between democracy (or the act of voting) and the immediate expectation of development. The vote can be seen as a part of "an exchange relation trans-substantiating the act of voting into the delivery of benefits" (Madsen, Nielsen and Skoda 2011: 4). It is this common perception of democracy (especially in multi-party democracies like India and Nepal) that sustains ethnic parties and vote banks thereby making the political representation of minority groups and their interests possible.

Formation of ethnic parties and vote bank politics is another pertinent feature of regional politics which has direct implications for the diffusion of democratic ideals. The combined indigenous/ethnic population of Nepal represents over thirty seven percent of the national population, thereby making ethnic groups the largest section of the electorate.[20] While discussing

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[20] See www.nefin.org.np/list/Indigenous-People-of-Nepal/5/0/5; accessed 24 September 2013.

the scale of movement, the size of the $\bar{A}div\bar{a}s\bar{\imath}$/$Janaj\bar{a}ti$ population is an important factor and given their population, the movement is very important to state restructuring and overall national politics (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 292). Demographic majority specifically in the regional context, converts numerically dominant ethnic groups into dependable vote banks. Thus, in the proposed Limbuwan, the Limbu majority axiomatically has great sway leading to dependence on ethnicity for the credibility or even longevity of any political party.[21]

It is this potential for electoral success that has led to the formation of regional Limbuwan parties. Despite their limited electoral success, the very existence of these parties offers a platform for direct political negotiation with the state, thereby making Limbu ethnic identity more attractive as a political choice, especially for those who have been unable to scale the hierarchy of the major political parties. On the other hand, blatant demand for Limbuwan and exclusive rights for the Limbus has an appealing tone and the emergence of regional parties exemplifies the instrumental use of ethnic identity as a political resource in order to gain more political control over public goods through the establishment of new lines of patronage and connections for the Limbus. The major national parties are still dominated by upper caste elites and remain the holders of the proverbial 'whip' with which they control their members. This is in contradistinction to the blatant expression of ethnic demands by the smaller regional parties who present themselves as the true representatives of ethnic interests and position themselves as important stakeholders in shaping the form and content of politics of the eastern hills.

The inherent potential to cultivate and mobilize a majority of the population on the basis of ethnicity has also been well harnessed in Darjeeling by political parties like the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, Gorkha National Liberation Front, Gorkha League, etc. whose main aim is the establishment of an ethnic homeland. In contrast to Nepal which saw a range of political actors emerge, the movement for Gorkhaland is maneuvered primarily by a single party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha which has made the Gorkha identity the only identity available for political mobilization. Gorkha as an ethnic category is chosen for political representation as it satisfies not only the question of ethnic distinction from the majority population of West Bengal

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[21] The combined population of the Limbus of Ilam, Panchthar and Terathum districts would lead to a Limbu majority in eastern Nepal (see, CBS 2012).

as well as from Nepalis of Nepal, but also because it legitimizes the demand for a separate state and hence control over the resources that it generates.

Like most ethnic movements, ethnic political parties in the eastern Himalaya have utilized pre-existing identities which may be re-imagined and reintegrated in order to solidify collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 297). Ethnic parties are also unapologetic about their ethnically-oriented demands that seek to benefit only a certain group of people and it is this clarity of purpose which enables them to cultivate and maintain vote banks that might eventually help them gain electoral success. The importance of ethnic vote banks is well illustrated by the 1994 General Elections in Sikkim. The electoral victory of the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) was precariously dependent on its ethnic vote bank of the Bhujel, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamang ethnic groups who were promised OBC status in return for the SDF's success in the election.[22] These groups represented the largest sections of the electoral population (40%) and by voting for Pawan Kumar Chamling, a member of the Rai ethnic group, they benefitted ultimately by being recognized as the OBCs at the state level (see Chakraborty 2000; Sinha *et al.* 2005).

Conclusion

Contemporary regional politics in east Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim is characterized by the use of ethnic identity as a political resource to negotiate with the state for control and/or access to public goods and services. The enactment of ethnic politics also performs the latent function of making

[22] According to the Election Commission Report quoted in the magazine *Chaya*, in 1993 the ethnic composition of the Nepali category clearly highlights a large matwali group. This group benefited the most from the change in the government.

Table 2: Nepali Ethnic Groups in Sikkim 1993

Ethnic Group	Total Population	Ethnic Group	Total Population
Newar	8,487	Tamang	11,319
Bahun	18,265	Magar	5,118
Chettri	23,489	Thami	51
Limboo	18,208	Mukhia	998
Rai	26,682	Bhujel	1,119
Gurung	12,778	Scheduled Caste	10,651

Source: Chaya (1998).

democracy more inclusive, accessible and relevant to those whose transition to democracy is recent. This has led to the evolution of ethnic democracy, a regional form of democracy where ethnic identity works in tandem with democratic institutions to establish a political system that is representative of the people, their culture and their politics. Although problems persist within this form of ethnic democracy (resource capture by ethnic elites, failure to address socio-economic grievances successfully, lack of consensus on tangible heritage, ethnic competition), it provides a framework through which to interrogate the dynamics between ethnicity and democracy that determine the nature and outcome of all political contestations. Politics in east Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim is representative of a regional trend wherein ethnic politics has led to a deeper entrenchment of democratic ideals, which has legitimized ethnic identity as a valid political resource. This has facilitated the political engagement of a wider section of people, helping achieve the democratic ideal of being a system that actually represents the people.

Acknowledgements

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