

***Constructing Democracy: Ethnicity and Democracy
in the eastern Himalayan Borderland***

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INSERT PHOTO 1
Darjeeling, Sikkim and eastern Nepal

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Notes

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 Authority
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

Agra-adhikar: prior rights demanded by indigenous groups in Nepal

Bikas: development

Busty: village

Chaplusi: sycophancy

Chakari: giving gifts, running errands in order to seek favour

Chaubandi-cholo: wrapper and blouse traditionally worn by Nepali women

Dasai: annual festival celebrated by different ethnic Nepali communities

Daura-suruwal: traditional Nepali menswear

Dhura: blocks/area of land

Hakim: officer

Jat: caste

Kaman: tea-estates

Kazi: land-owning nobility in Sikkim

Khukuri: machete shaped knife used by most hill communities but is symbolically associated with the Gorkhas of Darjeeling

Kipat: land-holding system of the Rai and Limbu communities in the eastern Himalaya

Kirat: Speakers of the Tibeto-Burman language in eastern Nepal and Sikkim are collectively called *Kirat/Kiranti/Kirata*.

Manghim: Limbu temple

Matwali: alcohol drinking groups ethnic groups which were placed below the Brahmins and Kshatriyas but above the untouchable castes in the caste hierarchy by Jung Bahadur Rana.

Palam: song sung during traditional Limbu festivals

Parbatiya: people from the western part of Nepal, also the language spoken

by them

Sarkari Jagir: government employment

Raikar: 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’¹¹ by her clientele in Gangtok, Sikkim. 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 hill. In less than five years since I had started my research the Rai dress had acquired a new form, sequins and colours and could now be easily distinguished 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, albeit with a slightly fashionable twist. Smaller shops sell cheaper, wholesale versions of similar products thereby making these items accessible to a larger number of customers. 10th mile road in Kalimpong² 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 lane 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 especially through 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. Manifestation of ethnic identity through clothes, cultural performances and structures have become key tools in the construction of group identities and their eventual conversion into bases of political mobilisation.

Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal are located on the borders of the modern nation-states of India and Nepal. There are political borderlands of recent origin and a legacy of 19th

century British colonial interventions in history and geography of the region. The imposition of these rigid political boundaries was in stark contrast to the practices and understandings of the border which had traditionally been fluid and defined by pre-existing culture, livelihood and geography. The eastern Himalaya is and has always been 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 defining parameters of ethnic activism, framing achievable goals and formulating an ethnic agenda which is recognizable within 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 increasing pervasiveness of this form of politics can be attributed to the ability of ethnic culture and tradition to cut across class, gender and other political affiliations.

At the heart of regional politics lies the Nepali ethnic group which 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 and contribute to 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 while Nepali will be used to denote a belonging to an ethno-linguistic group, the membership of which originates in but is not limited to Nepal.

The book is set against this context of ongoing ethnic revivalism and concomitant ethnic politics and will bring to focus three inter-related issues pertaining to the politics and culture of the eastern Himalayan borderland.

Firstly, there is a transformation of ethnic identity into political resource and a concomitant re-drawing of cultural boundaries of one of the Nepalis-one of most important ethnic groups in the region. 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, has been to ensure a better social, economic and political position for at least a substantial section of the group. Contemporary politics in the eastern Himalaya is a continuation of that attempt albeit through emphasis on exclusive ethnic identities rather than on the homogenous group identity that had been constructed in the early 20th 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 which raise a different set of existential exigencies that are being sought to be resolved through identity-based politics. This has led to the establishment of ethnic politics as a regional norm as evinced by claims for official recognitions of ethnic categories and is a political movement that is sustained through cultural revivalism, proliferation of ethnic associations and ethnic parties.

Ethnic identity (like gender, class, sexuality) is but one of the many forms of identity that is accessible to an individual as well as a collective and 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 overlap and reinforce each other (Rudolph, 2006:8). In order to understand the development of an ethnic group's identity it is imperative to investigate not only the socio-historic circumstances but also the individual and structural power in which particular ethnic configurations have developed as well as the mechanisms which 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 constructed in relation to others, not in isolation (Barth, 1969). This is evident in the constant evolution in the meaning and form of ethnic identity itself as a result of the change in the socio-political environment.³

In the eastern Himalaya, ethnicity is 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 have come to be understood by the function that they perform, especially in the propagation of group formation (Weber, 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, thereby leading to an inevitable perpetuation of ethnic politics.

Secondly, this pervasiveness of ethnic politics is also an indication 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 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 of 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 galvanizing mass sentiments and actions, it is the material and symbolic incentives attached to certain identities that promote an instrumental approach to identity construction and its eventual use. This, in turn, is in direct response to the policies and politics of the state and the manifestations of this relationship are at the heart of this book.

Finally, apart from institutional constraints and facilities at the local level, 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 uses ethnic affiliation as a resource for political mobilisation, a process which is dependent on essentialised representations of ethnic groups. On the other, this has given political agency to a wide spectrum of groups and individuals who could not otherwise be 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 provides a legitimate outlet through which to articulate ethnic grievances and hence facilitates identity construction and politics in a geographical space which 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. However, this very process of identity construction and identity politics have led to the evolution of a regional variation of democracy. This variation is dependent on essentialised, representations of ethnicity and has led to cultural revivalism, enhanced cross-border cultural exchange and 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, east 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, legal as well as 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 because of the presence of the Nepalis and the Nepali language which is the local language on either side of the international as well as regional borders of Sikkim, east Nepal and Darjeeling. Common language, shared culture and similar groups of people lend the illusion of an uninterrupted, seamless borderland which is disturbed only at times by political agitations that emphasize 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, 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 which has 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 (Hastings and Wilson, 1994:103). Cognitive boundaries (based on economic, political, national factors) have created layered identities amongst Nepali speakers in this ethnically contiguous area. Thus, the eastern Himalayan borderland represent a complex socio-political space with multiple layers of cross cutting identities which challenges 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 of understanding the region, its people and 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 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 which is unique to the eastern Himalaya. Many levels of interaction (kinship, religion, commerce etc) are maintained between those living in the region which provide a sense of stability and forms the foundation of interaction as trans-border residents (van Schendel, 2005:57).

The state plays a deterministic role in the creation of naturalized 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 for the relationship between all the actors in the borderland (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 the existence of similar developmental and political grievances. 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 leading to the formation of numerous informal strategies to deal with the trans-border aspects of their lives (Clement et al, 2005). This in turn has fostered a form of borderland politics which is dependent on very exclusive manifestation and politicisation of Nepali ethnic identity thereby forcing 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 is far different from the mental images of lawyers, politicians and intellectuals.

However, the form and content of ethnic politics is 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. The use of similar markers of ethnicity albeit in different ways and for varied political and economic ends makes 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, their construction and eventual political mobilisation do not exist in social, geographical or political isolation. Confluence of territory, power and the state is instrumental in issues of identity and culture (Wilson and Doonan, 2012:3). Regional politics of the eastern Himalaya therefore represents an extraordinary situation wherein 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 has a direct impact on the narratives of the state as well as 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 identify, mobilize themselves politically in order to engage within a democratic framework in the politics of the re-distribution of public goods and services. This in turn has given rise shape to a regional form of democracy which is constructed around and dependent on ethnic claims on the state.

The eastern Himalayan borderland is therefore a dynamic political space that warrants a movement away from generalisations, stereotypes and romantic imagery and a rigorous engagement with the political reality of the region. It is a cultural and political crossroad where different forms of 'everyday politics' have made ethnicity an inevitable component of politics. The region merits greater attention, more critical and newer perspectives which acknowledge the political agency of the people.

Studying the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: same same but different

This book has been shaped by a lifetime of observing local and regional politics around me and even within my own extended family and it was this lived experience, contradictions and questions around Nepali identity that informed my doctoral research. Living, travelling and working in different parts of the eastern Himalaya over the last few years has further contributed to a nuanced understanding of the people and their politics. I conducted ethnographic research in the hills and plains of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal for over seven months 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. I travelled extensively throughout the region, 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 under-graduate student in Delhi. During my undergraduate years, being labelled and teased as a ‘chinky’ did not have the same sting as being mistaken for someone from Nepal. My attempts at clarification of my national identity felt inadequate. A lot of people could not even locate Sikkim, my home state on a map of India and some others found it convenient to homogenize Nepalis of India with Nepalese citizens in India, an assumption that was facilitated by a common language and culture. There arose the question; if we are so similar, then why do we feel different and what is 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 region, the crucial difference between them lies in their political motivation, agency and action which is determined by the borders within which the Nepalis are located.

The primary aim of my work and engagement with issues in the eastern Himalaya has been to gather 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 it be from joining picket rallies, 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 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 but was not always successful as most of them either felt shy or stood in the background as I asked questions and more often than not they assumed that they had inadequate knowledge or experience to answer my questions. As my fieldwork progressed, I realized that it was always men who were at the forefront of political activities while female participants were relegated to rather domestic roles (like distributing tea) in political meetings or 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. Despite the all pervasiveness of ethnic politics and claims to gender equality, it still remains overwhelming dominated by men. Methodological limitations were also posed by incessant political strikes in Darjeeling due to the Gorkhaland movement which affected mobility and data collection.

While ethnographic data remains an integral part of this book, it is complemented by extensive historical research on the Nepalis, analysis of contemporary socio-economic structures that influence their politics and other cultural factors in a bid to present a wholistic account of the politics of being a Nepali in the eastern Himalaya. Having said 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 time. In the eastern Himalaya, ethnic identity is more than a theoretical construct and is an intrinsic part of life, a lived experience with strong ramifications. Ethnic identity functions as a social compass through which people navigate relationships and it helps locate their position within the existing social,

economic and political conditions. The researcher is not exempt from this assessment of class, caste, ethnicity, these 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 an illustration of how social, economic and political conditions determine which identities we make useful, how and when. Having conversations with people whilst walking through hills, valleys and tea-plantations, making friends, being invited to events, allowed inside homes, all of this was determined by my subscription of one identity or another. Almost as if to prove the malleability of identity from the outset, my Sikkimese identity helped me initiate numerous conversations with the Limbus of east Nepal, especially of the northern villages who had previously crossed over to Sikkim to work in cardamom fields. Despite spite of my Indian citizenship, my ethnic background as a (high caste) Hindu Nepali made it easier to find accommodation in Ilam with a Newar family and my *matwali* background⁴ helped me integrate with members of other *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 caste or whether I was 'Aryan or Mongoloid' that was more important in forming perceptions about me as a Sikkimese who, apparently, coming from the land of 'development, peace and prosperity' would be unable to understand economic hardships. It was important but difficult to break these mental constructs about me, which could only achieved by listening to them and letting them know that I was trying to understand their lives. This was crucial in understanding how people position themselves in opposition to others and the persistence of stratification based on class (which coincided with ethnicity) 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. It was the fine line between being able or unable to engage in formal and routinized process of knowing the 'right people' and gaining familiarity with the bureaucratic network that affected my research. 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 process built on formality and idiosyncrasies of a particular bureaucrat.

These experiences bore testimony to the fact that identity-ethnic, gender, class- were very important but more so was the malleability of these identities 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.

Perceptions about the place and the people in it are influenced by their representations in existing literature. While ethnic identity features prominently in literature emerging before and after Sikkim's merger with India in 1975 it has 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'Maley, 1907 and Rose, 1978). However, there is a marked trend in contemporary scholarship involving the use of ethnic identity as 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 as well as the imperatives for cultural revivalism within this group (see McDuie-Ra, 2011; Arora, 2007 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 Turin, 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 sidelines by ethnic issues. Ethnic politics is usually analysed within the matrix of economic determinism and discrimination towards other ethnic groups in the hills and plains of Nepal by upper caste hill groups (see Lawoti, 2007; Bhattachan, 2008, 1995; Gurung, 1997). A thorough investigation of Limbu ethnic politics is restricted by limited literature on the region and on the Limbu ethnic group itself in English or Nepali.

Pertinent to the understanding of regional politics are contributions by Susan Hangen whose book *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal* (2010) and other subsequent papers (2007) analyses 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, 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 is highly relevant in the understanding of ethnic politics which has come to be associated with preservation and even re-invention of ethnic culture. Schlemmer establishes an important link between culture and rights and 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* reflects 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 grassroot politics and the different forms of agency that people have come to bear on the state and society around them. The book discusses in great detail the cultural lives of the Thami/Thangmis and especially the role played by ethnic associations in constructing the imagery of this ethnic group that is acceptable to the state as well its constituent members. It 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 is an important addition to the literature on the eastern Himalaya and study complements the wider focus of the present book on regional politics, role of ethnic associations and the state as key drivers of ethnic identity formation.

While excellent sources on ethnicity, religion, literature exist in English (generally, not specific to east Nepal), most of these are inaccessible to the majority 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 Nepali⁵ (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 that are related to Limbu history, culture and society. Amongst the easily available and popular books available in eastern Nepal was 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 the state represented by upper caste groups and thereby strengthening 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 relation at the macro level does not analyse sufficiently the role played by the state or its extensions (like the bureaucracy) in the process of ethnic politics.

In the Darjeeling hills, themes of Gorkha as a martial race, ethnic discrimination of the Nepalis and the violent Gorkhaland movement of 1986 have been the focus of Nepali scholars like T.B.Subba (1992, 1999), 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), Chettri (2013) and Booth (2011) whose doctoral thesis discusses the finer nuances of Gorkha language and identity. These works are instructive in the understanding of the Gorkha identity, the insecurities and rhetoric that supports this identity as well as 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 with work that concentrates more on the instrumental rationale of

ethnic revivalism and interactions with the state which are also the core basis of the political movement around the Gorkha identity.

Thus, while ethnic politics and ethnic identity has received a fair amount of academic interest, there is a serious lacuna in the study and projection of this region as a political space and the interconnectedness between ethnic identity and other social, economic and political aspects of life. Also, most academic interest is limited to a specific area in the Himalaya leading to a palpable dearth of cross-border studies and the book hopes to fill this vacuum by addressing both these issues.

Facilitating ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya

A broader contextualisation of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya also enables a nuanced understanding of regional politics. One of the most important factors that affect the articulation and expression of ethnic politics is the state⁶ and its bureaucratic extensions. The state does not determine ethnicity but it influences ethnic politics by its recognition or non-recognition of ethnicity as a legitimate basis for political organisation. This makes prior ethnic divisions more permanent, promotes new mobilisations of formerly unrecognized groups and incites 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 for political reservations. On the other hand, the West Bengal government does not officially recognise the ethnic distinction of the Nepalis as it would legitimize 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) in 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 agitate and rupture the social order, thereby creating ethnic discord which was non-existent before.

On the other hand, as a mediator and mobilizing mechanism of minority symbols and interests, the state, as a part of the larger political system, also relies on ethnic strategies to secure the 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. 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 to the strategies of action by members of different ethnic groups.

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, reserved 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 the wide web of institutional mechanisms that is needed to support it is a structure that enables the state to wield 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 aggrandization of state power as it is the state that controls all aspects of material development of a region.

Mere existence of ethnic groups or their grievances does not result in political mobilization of these groups or issues. Writing in the context of Indian politics Chandra (2005:239) highlights the role of the state in encouraging ethnic politics through its policies and practices of the re-distribution of public goods mainly through networks of patronage. According to Chandra (ibid), in such political systems individuals get ahead either by becoming a part of the state themselves and then obtaining control over the flow of patronage or by cultivating ties with someone who controls the state and thus becoming consumers, if not distributors of patronage benefits. This position of the state is however, also influenced by the prevailing societal structure which is a melange of social organisations rather than a dichotomous structure of centre and periphery. Society constrains the state and transforms it through internal forces but in the same process the

society is also transformed by the state. Societies are not static formations but are constantly *becoming* as a result of these struggles 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, united by their use of ethnicity in their political agenda. 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 the book, the aim of ethnic activism in the eastern Himalayan borderland is not to change the various structures that promote social, political and economic discrepancies but to enable better access to the state and public goods. This 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, malleable nature of ethnic identity which makes it an opportune breeding ground for political mobilization.

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, furthering the exploitation of ethnicity as a resource for political action. Concomitantly, the expansion and contraction of group boundaries, essentialisation as well as revivalism of ethnic culture can be contextualised and understood as an instrumental response to changed political circumstance which aims to better facilitate their access to or control over resources that are controlled by the state. Ethnic politics can be seen as an interplay between institutional structures (at the local, regional and national level) and the mobilization of ethnicity as a political resource by ethnic groups for effective negotiation with the state for economic and political benefits as well as cultural recognition. This is a process which is guided by over-arching dominant and well established mechanisms of patronage.

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) ascribe the hierarchically structured social system along a moral code explicating mutual obligations as one of the key factors in determining the prevailing norms of behaviour, as well as framing expectations and approaches towards the state in South Asian societies. Thus, elaborate systems of hierarchy and patronage have constructed the worldview and everyday understandings of relations with those holding power and authority.

This worldview has also percolated to how people perform and function within a democratic system. Democracy can then be said to have been ‘vernacularized’ - a process by which Indian democracy and its understandings have been moulded to fit local customs and notions of what constitutes as political and in turn giving rise to new forms of political agency (Michelutti, 2014:642). 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, institutionalisation 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 decentralisation 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 centre and periphery. This may result in tendencies of decentralisation 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 organisations and other contexts within which ethnic divisions are 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 the book

The book is based on historical data, ethnographic evidence and secondary data pertaining to three different areas and in order to avoid potential complications in the structure and design of the chapters, repetition of ideas and to preserve the clarity and focus of arguments, the chapters have been organised thematically. Each chapter is divided into sections that focus on a particular area and the treatment of theme/issue in that area is discussed in detail. It was not possible to locate the exact same phenomena, actors or events in the three areas which led to an internal diversity in how ethnic politics and democracy was experienced in the region. This diversity is reflected very strongly in the book and the lack of intensity or actors in one place does not 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, culminating 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 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 give a contextual background to the arguments presented 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, the role played by the state and most importantly, the existence of a potent 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 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, the different actors and their contribution to the manifestation of ethnic politics. The exploration and exploitation of material culture has led to ethnic revivalism and 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.

Chapter 1: Locating the 'Nepali' in the eastern Himalayan borderland

As a trans-border phenomenon, the Nepalis have contributed to the history of state formation in the entire Himalayan region, especially the eastern half which stretches from central Nepal to north-eastern India. An undeniable fact, albeit one often considered politically inconvenient by Indian-Nepalis is their historical and cultural links with Nepal. Denial of this connection, more often than not, shapes political action in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills and identification as a Nepali, strictly in its cultural sense of sharing a common heritage has lent a distinct political status to the Nepalis of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. This ethnic label has, in turn, produced many challenges and opportunities for the Nepalis of the area, thereby leading to the exploitation of this identity in different ways in a bid to secure material as well as cultural prosperity.

It is therefore imperative to re-visit the socio-economic history of the region in order to contextualise how group identity formation in the eastern hills was triggered by political changes in the Kingdom of Gorkha in the early 17th century. This cultural, historical and social connection and the ethnic group so formed plays an important role in how Nepalis see themselves today and how the intricacies within this ethnic group enable the proliferation of contemporary ethnic politics.

The first half of the chapter engages in a historical narration of ethnic group formation which begins in the Kingdom of Gorkha and ends in Darjeeling and Sikkim during a period when social, cultural and religious boundaries defined the life chances of people more than geographical or political borders (if they existed at all). It is the history of becoming a Nepali, a process that illustrates the socially constructed nature of ethnic groups and their inherent potential for politicisation. The second half of the chapter focuses on being a Nepali in the eastern Himalaya and discusses the contemporary politics of the region which is based on ethnic identity.

Becoming Nepali: colonial history and ethnic group formation

In the Indian sub-continent, the 17th century was marked by the decline of the Mughal empire and the gradual advent of European colonisers, especially the British who were successful in the conquests and annexations of numerous princely states, giving form to what would later be known as British India. During the same period, the Himalayan region was passing through a similar phase where disintegration of older empires precipitated the rise of new ones. The western Himalayan monarchical principalities of the Karnali basin ruled by the Malla kings had existed from the early 12th century. Known as *Khas*- the inhabitants of the region spoke an Indo-European language and the social system was organised on the basis of a caste system which was oriented around war- the priests at the top, followed by the soldiers belonging to the Khas and Magar⁷ groups, the bell ringers (*damai*), blacksmith (*kami*) and cobblers (*sarki*) at the bottom. These groups maintained a strict ritual hierarchy and came together only during war (Toffin, 2006: 226).⁸ Efficient agriculturists, the culture and tradition of the people of this region was deeply embedded in Hinduism and in the divine rights of the king who was considered to be a part of Vishnu, *Vishnu amsa*, the protector of the universe in Hindu mythology. The Khas considered themselves as higher, purer Hindus than those who lived in *Muglan* the land defiled by the Mughals.

The Karnali state disintegrated in the 14th century leading to the formation of numerous smaller states or principalities which came to be known as the *caubisye rajya* (twenty four kingdoms) which were constantly engaged in petty warfare and border raids. Amongst these states was the principality of Gorkha, ruled by Prithvi Narayan Shah, which by means of conquests, annexations and marriage was able to consolidate sixty principalities. In 1768 Shah finally conquered the Kathmandu valley, then known as Nepal and gave a rudimentary shape to the present country of Nepal. The boundaries of this new kingdom of Gorkha were constantly shifting but between his ascension in 1743 and his death in 1775, the kingdom stretched to the Kangra valley in the west, all of east Nepal and a large portion of modern Sikkim (Whelpton: 2005:35).⁹ The boundaries of the Gorkha kingdom were finally drawn in the 19th century after its westward expansion was halted at the Sutlej by Ranjit Singh, the King of Punjab in 1809-10, and its eastern boundaries were defined by its defeat in the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-1816. With the

drawing up of the territorial boundaries these two realms finally coincided, giving a physical shape and contiguous form to Prithvi Narayan Shah's kingdom.

In administration, the king saw himself as the landlord of all in his possession (*muluk*) and his relation with his subjects was based on an extensive patrimonial relationship where the tracts of land were organised on the basis of tenurial categories and then assigned, bestowed or auctioned to his subjects. Various tenurial categories like *jagir* for military officers, *nankirs* for civil administrators, *raikars* for tenant cultivators' defined different statuses of individuals in the society. The tenurial categories differed with respect to the specific rights and duties of the subjects' vis-à-vis the king's land as well as with respect to rights which were accorded by the king such as inheritance, divisibility, transferability and irrevocability (Burghart, 1984: 103). Thus, there was an elaborate network of patron-client relationship that revolved around land that made the very nature of the state extractive and exploitative (Riaz and Basu, 2007:8).

Lack of a monetised economy meant that taxes from agricultural production formed the basis of the revenue of the Gorkha kingdom. The lack of hard currency and a centralized political bureaucracy led to the spread of the *jagir* system whereby the army and other government soldiers were allocated land from which they were allowed to collect taxes. This led to widespread absentee landlordism and a long hierarchical chain of command which gave rise to the growth of local elites as powerful middlemen thereby increasing the burden of the peasants who had to pay taxes to their actual landlords as well as placate the local elites with tributes (See Regmi, 1984). Payment of government officials in land also meant that, over time, agricultural land became scarce which put undue pressure on the peasants who had no tenurial security.

The kingdom of Gorkha, as formed by Prithvi Narayan and his descendents was a conglomeration of the conquered territory, created by a political elite, whose prime interest and motivation lay in the control over resources in order to fund its military expansion. This made the state not only the prime mover of the material forces of production but also of social organisation (Regmi, 1984:9). The Shah rulers (1769-1846) were faced with a challenging task of integrating various groups and communities with different cultures, modes of production, social relationships and patterns of loyalty. The power of the Gorkha rulers depended on how their relationship was perceived by the

various groups which in turn depended on whether these groups had been subjugated through defeat in war or through reconciliation¹⁰ and the level of difficulty in ruling these groups. Under the Shahs there was very little establishment of efficient administration or revenue collection owing to the topographical constraints which made this difficult and the lack of centralisation (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1991:234). Control was strongest near the seat of power in Kathmandu and in the central hills and became weaker towards the periphery of the kingdom, leading to a situation where there was no identification with the Gorkha state in the Terai and in the eastern hills, which made Gorkhali rule almost colonial.

Lack of centralization and expedient administration was compensated for by religion; Hinduism provided the king with popular legitimacy. As the head of the patrimonial state, the king's relationship with his subjects was hierarchically and ascriptively defined and Hinduism was the foundation upon which his divine sanctions stood. It was the king's duty to maintain the moral order of his subjects and thus one of the fundamental objectives of the state was the creation of an *Asal Hindustan* (Land of Pure Hindus) in contrast to the Indian subcontinent which had been polluted by the Muslims as well as the British (Sharma, 1997: 476; Whelpton, 2007:56).

The political testament or the *Dibya Upadesh* given by Prithvi Narayan in 1774 formed the basis of the Hindu kingdom where *dharma* was the ordering principle with a ruler who was entitled to enforce the socio-cosmic order (Burghart, 1996:268). This ideology was the foundation of a Hindu kingdom and the eventual social stratification which was codified by the Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana in the *Muluki Ain* (National Legal Code) of 1854.

However as Pfaff-Czarnecka (1991: 255) posits, 'even when talking of Nepal as a true Hindu kingdom...it was far too difficult to legitimize themselves (i.e. kingship) by way of cultural concepts alien to the conquered population, while maintaining and establishing cultural cleavages served their purpose'. Thus, apart from the protection of cows the Shahs did not proselytize the non-Hindu population (Michaels, 1997:86).¹¹ What emerged as more important and powerful in the spread of Hinduism amongst the non-Hindu population was the preferential treatment in the division of labour where all of the important positions in the central administration, such as dignitaries and army

officers, were held by high caste Hindus. This led to the co-option of the local elites in the system, who found it beneficial to either imitate or accept Hindu rituals and traditions (especially the festival of Dasain)¹² in order to find favour with the Hindu overlords leading to an eventual *sanskritization* of the entire group.

However after Prithvi Narayan's death in 1775, none of his descendants could command complete control over the kingdom and its administration owing to factional politics in the court (see Rose, 1971; Whelpton, 2007). This unstable situation culminated in the Kot Massacre of 1846¹³ which catapulted the influential political-elite family of Jung Bahadur Kunwar¹⁴ into de-facto supremacy. In 1857, Jung Bahadur formalised an arrangement whereby the king acted as the head of the state but all powers were effectively in the hands of the Prime-Minister and the Rana family ruled over Nepal for over a hundred years till 1951.

During this period *Hinduization* became an important state agenda and was strictly enforced by Jung Bahadur Rana who, unlike Prithvi Narayan, did not want to achieve a real Hindusthan but sought to protect the only kingdom in the world which was ruled by Hindus. In doing so, the state became more involved and aggressive in promoting as well as legitimising itself through religion (Burghart, 1996:271-72). Following the precedence of the Shah rulers, the Ranas kept the kingdom isolated from influences from the southern border. Despite the burgeoning power of the British imperialists in India and the eventual establishment of a Resident Officer in Kathmandu after the Anglo-Gurkha war (1814-16), a 'closed door' policy was maintained by Jung Bahadur who was aware of the political repercussions of British interference in domestic politics as exemplified by the colonisation of India (Whelpton, 2007: 43, 47; Gurung, 1997: 501).

In 1854, Jung Bahadur Rana enforced the *Muluki Ain*. The significance of the *Muluki Ain* was that it encompassed all people under the Gorkhali rule. The *Ain* placed all societal groups within a ritual hierarchy with the Brahmin and Chettri at the top of the moral order, a position which usually also coincided with the economic order. Thereafter, the state had a more active role in the maintenance and even alteration of caste statuses in order to accommodate politico-economic powers (Gurung, 1997:502).¹⁵ It framed the caste hierarchy in such a way that 'diversity was translated to inequality' and positions

were increasingly ascribed to different ranks that corresponded with caste/ethnic divisions (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997: 425). The organization of the social structure on the basis of the Civil Code not only incorporated the tribal hill groups into a Hindu ritual hierarchy but was another measure of consolidating internal division and diversity and re-affirming the position of the Hindu ruler. However, the impact of the *Ain* on the local social structure, especially of the peripheral areas, is difficult to assess because its effectiveness depended on its enforcement in a country which was spread across a vast geographical terrain with limited modes of communication (Onta, 1996). One of the most potent forces that contributed to the gradual process of Hinduization was the migration of Hindu groups from the western and central areas of Nepal to the eastern hills. These groups might have been migrating to escape the oppressive central elites but their movement eastward had a great impact on the displacement of various *Kiranti*¹⁶ groups from the kingdom of Gorkha to British India, Sikkim and Bhutan.

Going to Muglan: Emigration from the Kingdom of Gorkha to India

Migration of different ethnic groups is an important aspect of the social-history of almost all ethnic groups in the eastern Himalaya. Visiting remote border village I observed that stories of life and work on the other side of the border were still fresh in the minds of the people I met; there were many people in the villages of eastern Nepal, mostly older men, who had travelled to north Sikkim to work in the cardamom fields of Dzongu and simultaneously many Limboo women from eastern Nepal who had married into families living across the border at Uttarey, west Sikkim. People have been constantly moving between geographical and cultural borders even before the advent of modern political borders. It is a phenomenon that continues unabated but the circumstances and institutions that govern it have changed.

Migration for social and economic purposes was also historically true for different individuals and ethnic groups who moved outwards from the erstwhile kingdom of Gorkha and has been narrativised in novels like *Basai* (Chettri, 1989), *Muluk Bahira* (Bangdel, 1947) and *Muglan* (Bhattarai, 1988). As stated above, the Gorkha kingdom was created not only on the basis of conquest but also through compromise, especially in the

east where Prithvi Narayan was met with substantial resistance from the Limbu kings. Even though the Limbus had been incorporated into the kingdom in 1772 they had been given privileges with regard to their communal land holding pattern or the *kipat* system and a degree of autonomy owing to their strategic position on the border with Sikkim. This status quo changed with the increasing demand by the Gorkhali rulers for land and resources in order to support their military expeditions and the migration of the upper caste Bahuns' and Chettris', also known as *Parbatiyas*, into the territory of the *kirat* (hill tribes of the eastern hills).

The west to east movement of the *Parbatiya* groups disrupted one of the most fundamental aspects of the groups living in the eastern hills, their *kipat* system, where land could be used exclusively by an individual on the basis of his membership of the tribe that communally owned the land. This system was in direct contrast to the *raikar* (state landlordism) system under which the rights of an individual to utilization and transfer of the land are recognised by the state as long as the taxes are paid (Regmi, 1963 in Caplan, 1970:3). In order to support their military conquests and administrative growth the Gorkhali rulers had to create an economic infrastructure for the extraction of raw material and labour needed to provision their armies. Despite granting corporate claims to the Limbus on lands based on membership the *Parbatiyas* were allowed to settle within Kiranti holdings. Initially the local Rai or Limbu headmen profited from the new cultivation methods as well as the tribute in the form of cash, agricultural produce or corvee services which was paid by the *Parbatiya* migrants but in time they were able to dominate the indigenous population, politically as well as economically. This was achieved through methods of exclusion embedded in the social relations of the indigenous groups and the discrimination perpetuated through the judicial relations imposed by the centralized Hindu monarchy from Kathmandu (English, 1982:39-40).

The socio-economic conditions of the *kiratas* altered with the migration of the ritually superior *Parbatiyas* (upper caste hill Hindus) who were familiar with the legal system, rules of land ownership and monetised economy (Joshi and Rose, 1966: 6). The *kipat* system was not only considered as economically inadequate but the continuation of this cultural practice was seen as a resistance to national integration (Forbes, 1999: 116). Through numerous legislations¹⁷ *kipat* lands were converted to *raikar* which prompted

mass alienation of *kipat* land and an eastward migration towards Sikkim, Darjeeling and Bhutan.

Another important element that had a pervasive effect on the social identity of those groups living in the eastern hills which contributed to outmigration was *sanskritization*. As a result of the promulgation of the *Muluki Ain*,¹⁸ the non-Hindu groups were inducted from a horizontal clan and kinship system or *jati*¹⁹ to a hierarchical system of *jat* (caste) and associated norms (Gurung, 1997:502). *Sanskritization* was linked to a change in the economic pattern that had been introduced by the Gorkha rulers. The new economic system imposed by the Gorkha rulers changed the economy from a communal to a tributary mode of production. Loss of *kipat* to the incoming *Parbatiyas* altered the social dynamics as Rais and Limbus turned towards the Hindu creditors for political leadership as well as patronage. This process was completed with the increasing influence and frequency in the usage of the *Parbatiya* language, dresses and incorporation of Hindu rituals, most prominently amongst the economically better off Limbus (Jones, 1976; see Sagant, 1996 for an extended discussion).

The local elite played an important role in this dual process of land alienation and *sanskritization* which catalysed migration. Taxes had previously been essential for the upkeep of the expansionary activities of the state, however, once the boundaries were drawn, they were used for the consolidation of the territories that had been annexed. Finally, with the rise of the Ranas, taxes were raised to support the unproductive elites (Subba, 2002: 122-23). Thus, heavy taxation and mass alienation of land worked to the advantage of the incoming Hindu migrants led to the first wave of migration from Nepal in the 18th century (Gaenszle, 2002: 334; English, 1982: 36). Seasonal/ temporary migration and extended kinship networks through marriage until very recently long remained a regularized feature between ethnic groups, especially Limbus, living on either side of the border. However, migration owing to growing indebtedness and loss of land, occurred on a very large scale and was most of the time permanent. By the end of the Rana rule in 1951, only a third of the land in eastern Nepal remained under *kipat* (Caplan, 1970:58 in Subba, 1999:40) and it is estimated that from 1840-1860, 12-15 percent of Nepal's Rai, Limbu and other eastern hill population moved across the border (Pradhan, 1991:192).

Apart from the internal problems of economic suppression external factors were also important in the out-migration from eastern Nepal. Barring its northern borders, all the neighbouring regions around Nepal were under the influence of the British colonisers, whose commercial and military ventures created opportunities for those who had been alienated from their land or wanted to escape exploitation. From 1856, establishment of tea plantations in the hills of Darjeeling and Assam had proven to be a commercially successful venture for the British and thus with stories of '*chiyako botma paisa phalcha*' (money grows on tea bushes), migrating further eastwards to Darjeeling was seen as a better alternative to the futility of open revolt against the state (Whelpton, 2007:57; Golay, 2006: 82).

Another important factor that prompted migration was recruitment into the British army of 'Gurkhas',²⁰ which had started after the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16. The recruitment of soldiers from the Kingdom of Gorkha into Ranjit Singh's army had begun in as early as 1824 and by 1830, his army had a special Gurkha Corp (Hutt, 1997:113), however, the recruitment in the British army was prohibited by Jung Bahadur and his successors. This prompted the British to set up recruitment centres in the Indian border towns of Gorakhpur in 1886 and Darjeeling town in 1902, which was then moved to nearby Ghoom (Farwell, 1984:75, 76). One of the major incentives for joining the army was payment made in cash rather than in kind. Thus began the exodus of migrants from Nepal into the hills and plains of British India as agriculturists, labourers and army recruits.

Migration to the neighbouring kingdom of Sikkim had begun during the aforementioned period of Gorkhali expansion when the Gorkhas overran a large part of Sikkim in 1788-89 and annexed the Darjeeling tract for a period of over thirty years. This enabled the movement and settlement of people from both west Sikkim and eastern Nepal which continued even after the territorial demarcation by the Treaty of Sigauli in 1816 (O'Maley, 1907:629).²¹ Sporadic migration into Bhutan had also begun in the 18th century but mass migration towards southern Bhutan began after the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1865. Nepalis were engaged in clearing forests, agriculture and eventually became Bhutan's main producers of food and source of cash income (Hutt,

2005: 45). Migrants from Nepal settled first in Samchi and Sibsü in the south western corner of Bhutan and then in the east (Joseph, 1999).

Migration to the north-eastern areas of British-India also began after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-25 brought present day north eastern India, with the exception of Sikkim,²² under British control. After the end of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1816, the British formally started recruiting Nepalis into their army and in 1817, the Gurkha regiment was first deployed in the Sylhet operation as a part of the Cuttack Legion (later known as the Assam Light Infantry) which eventually led to permanent Gurkha settlement in the northeast beginning in 1824 (Sinha, 2008). Recruitment as well as settlement in the north-east was actively encouraged by the British as the 'Gurkhas' were considered 'proverbially brave, active and capable of enduring fatigue both in the hills and jungles and free from the prejudices which the Hindus of the regular troops were invariably accustomed,' (Hussain, 2003:69).

The first generation of migrants who came as members of the regiment and the police provided the impetus for others to follow. One major factor prompting migration was what Enloe (1980:27) calls the 'Gurkha syndrome' where the characteristic features of the Gurkha (bravery and loyalty) were to be found only in certain ethnic groups, 'so embedded in its blood' and that those born in the cantonment areas were not of the same quality as those who came from the hills of Nepal. The 'line boys' born in the provinces did not have the required attributes to make a good soldier and thus, the procurement and the eventual settlement of first generation Gurkhas was actively pursued by the British (Caplan, 1991:585; Hussain, 2003: 71).

By the early 19th century service in the military was not the only attraction and migrants also came as graziers and herders, to work in the tea and sugarcane plantations and in the construction of road and railway lines (Subba, 2003:61). They were also regularly hired as labour and a large number were periodically brought from Nepal to serve in transport or as carrier units in numerous frontier expeditions carried out by the British. The most prominent migration however was to Darjeeling that had been directly settled and colonised by the British. While Darjeeling had been 'granted' to the British in 1835 by the Raja of Sikkim in return for some concessions and a yearly grant of Rs.3000, the Kalimpong subdivision had first been lost by the Raja of Sikkim to the Bhutanese

after the war in 1706. This area was later annexed, along with the Duars (originally a part of Sikkim) by the British in 1865 and included in the present Darjeeling district in 1866. Establishment of Gurkha recruitment centre in Ghoom in 1902 also encouraged migration and settlement as there was a marked tendency for the retired Gurkha soldiers to settle in India after leaving military service (only about 1/3 of the 11, 000 Gurkhas discharged from the British army after the first world war chose to return to Nepal) (Blaike et al, 1980:37 in Hutt, 1997:113).

Different ethnic groups migrating to Darjeeling were not confronted by any other ethnic group as the area was largely uninhabited except for a few Lepcha and Magar hamlets. However they were bound to another variety of servitude in the colonial empire as occupants of the lowest strata in the economic hierarchy. This led to the formation of an underpaid, impoverished working class majority subservient to the wealthy tea estate owners who were mostly British. This migrant population of agriculturists was not only confronted with just another ethnic community but also faced a technologically advanced and economically thriving class. Thus, while the migrants in other areas were confronted with other groups, ethnic identity formation in Darjeeling was a product of differentiation on the basis of economic class which also coincided with ethnicity.

Language and ethnic group formation

This movement eastwards propelled different ethnic groups from one form of oppression to the other, namely, from the exploitative Gorkha state to either the colonial empire of the British or the highly feudalistic kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan. Thus, in these new lands, common exigencies arising out of migration and economic subservience dissolved differences of ethnicity or ritual hierarchy and facilitated the formation of a homogenous ethnic group. Most of the areas that Nepalis migrated to had already been settled by other groups and their reception in these areas was either hostile, like in Sikkim, or welcoming and leading to swift assimilation with the local population as was the case in the north-eastern frontier of British India. Thus, in a true Barthian sense, the self-identification of this migrant group as 'Nepali' began when it came to be considered as the 'Other' by members of the pre-existing groups who had drawn their boundaries on

the basis of language or religion. Although the majority of the migrants spoke various Tibeto-Burman languages and shared Mongoloid features, there were also those groups, like Bahun, Chettris, Kami, Damai and Sarkis, which had been in the fold of the Hindu caste system prior to migration. Until the 1920s these were the only groups who identified themselves as 'Nepalis' while the rest maintained their own ethnic languages and customs, identifying themselves as Limbus, Magars, Tamangs etc. Thus while social interaction with different ethnic groups led to the formation of the identification of the Nepali, it was only with the development of an educated and culturally conscious elite that the Tibeto-Burmese speakers began to identify themselves as 'Nepalis' on the basis of one key common denominator - language. This was used to identify and distinguish Others who did not belong to the 'linguistic confederacy' called Nepalis (Subba, 1992:38).²³

British-India in the early 20th century was in the grip of a political and cultural revolution. Against this background, the construction of an ethnic identity by a coterie of educated men in Darjeeling was a direct response to colonization. As Onta (1996:198) says, 'this class experienced colonial modernity not so much as a direct consequence of colonization but because they felt that they were lagging behind their Indian colonized counterparts'. Thus, the making of the ethno-linguistic community called 'Nepali' was a result of a conscious effort by the growing literati represented by prominent literary figures like Parasmani Pradhan, Suryabikram Gyawali and Dharnidhar Koirala. This process first began in Benares and gradually shifted to Darjeeling which became and still remains the centre of the Nepali literary movement in India.

As one of the most holy Hindu cities, Benares or Varanasi had long been a site of pilgrimage and patronage for Hindu rulers as well as one of the highest centres of Vedic learning. Attracting learned scholars and young minds, Benares also became an important centre for language and literature with the growth of secular education which had its roots in post-Enlightenment Western rationalism and utilitarianism, thereby leading to the growth of printing and publishing houses (Chalmers, 2003:65). In stark contrast to Darjeeling, language and literature was strictly controlled by the Rana regime in Nepal which did not promote education, free expression or political education. Thus apart from government handbills, notices and books of a religious nature printed from the

Giddhe (vulture) press which had been established by Jung Bahadur after his travel to the United Kingdom in 1850, nothing else was printed or published in Nepal. Autocratic in nature, the Rana regime vehemently opposed any form of mass education and cultivated illiteracy as a measure to prevent the growth of political consciousness, ‘lest they should be awakened and conscious of their rights’ (Shakya, 1977:19 in Caddell, 2007:4, Amatya, 2004:38).

Owing to the regime’s complete monopoly over publishing inside Nepal until the 1930s, poets and writers published from Banaras and later Darjeeling. A large number of students also made their way to Benares where they were exposed to the influences of Indian cultural and political activists, which itself was undergoing a period of cultural reawakening (Pradhan, 1984). In 1901 the *Gorkhapatra*, a periodical, was published in Nepal under the direct supervision of the state (it remained the only periodical for the next thirty years) and in 1913 in an attempt to promote Nepali literature, the Rana administration established the *Gorkha Bhasa Prakashini Samiti* (Gorkha Language Publication Committee). This committee had a dual role acting as a publishing house for books which met its approval and as a censor on everything else that was produced. Consequently, for a long time Benares remained the centre of free literary activity and publications of books in the *Parbatiya* (later renamed as Nepali) language (Pradhan, 1984:45; Hutt, 1991:7).

The second half of the nineteenth century was an important period in the definition and shaping of modern Indian languages through the increase in publication as well as the transformation of these languages as new usages were introduced through newspapers, pamphlets, fiction and poetry as well as political, philosophical and historical non-fiction (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006:123). The sixty years between 1880-1940 marked an important era when the Gorkhali/Nepali language forged ahead in a new direction in India which was witnessing a socio-religious regeneration and a political movement against British colonization. During this time the migrant Gorkha population had started seeing itself as a part of the larger Indian community. The formation of the All India Gorkha League in 1924 in Dehradun²⁴ was hailed as a ‘political party of the Indian Gorkhas, by the Indian Gorkhas’, so as to supplement and complement the struggle for India’s independence (Bomjan, 2008:86) and journals like *Gorkha Sathi*

(*Gorkha Friend*) were published from Calcutta in 1907 with the aim of fostering patriotism amongst the Indian-Nepalis. Once again, British colonialism had an important role to play in the construction of the Nepali identity.

According to Chalmers (2002:31), in spite of Benares' centrality to language, literature and political activism, the start of the 20th century saw an increase in the significance of Darjeeling in these fields. The community in Darjeeling differed from that of Benares in its ethnic composition as of the working population in Darjeeling belonged to the Tibeto-Burman language group in contrast to the Nepali-speaking upper caste Hindus who travelled to Benares. Thus there were few ancestral Nepali speakers in Darjeeling. Since many political activists from Nepal took refuge in Benares, most of their writing engaged with politics related to Nepal and was often removed from issues such as education, employment and administration which affected the settled Nepali community of Darjeeling.

Nonetheless, language development was greatly influenced by the Benares literati whose access to the hills was increased by the arrival of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railways and who eventually became the intelligentsia of the hills. One of the key factors that propelled the advancement of language was the pervasiveness of the notion of the backwardness of the Gorkha *jati* in comparison to the other communities in India (Onta, 1996:150). Since the majority of the population were employed either in the tea estates as daily wage labourers or as Gurkha soldiers, literacy was a privilege which they could not afford. Thus, for the Darjeeling literati, influenced and inspired by Benares, language development became the root of societal progress and a recurrent theme in most of the journals published during the early twentieth century (Chalmers, 2003).

Two other factors that advanced the development of the Nepali language were its necessity as a link language between the different ethnic groups who were recruited as Gurkhas as well as for the propagation of Christianity by the Scottish Mission Churches in Darjeeling. While J.A.Ayton published the first Nepali grammar in 1820 containing an 'elementary description of the language', Reverend Turnbull published Nepali grammar with extensive vocabularies. Finally in 1923 An English- Nepali dictionary was published by Reverend H.C.Duncan with the assistance of Gangaprasad Pradhan (Turner, 1926:365-66). Participation in the early Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling was limited to

a tiny literate circle, as exemplified in the relationship between Parasmani Pradhan²⁵ and Reverend Gangaprasad Pradhan, who published a monthly called the *Gorkhe Khabar Kagat* (Gorkha Newspaper) from 1901-1932, the second Gorkhali/Nepali journal to be published in India in Nepali but with what Parasmani called a ‘Darjeeling slant.’²⁶ Nonetheless, the elites involved in the language development project continued to strive and one of their earliest achievements was the recognition of Nepali (or *Parbatiya*, *Khas Kura* or *Gorkha bhasa* as it was earlier called) as a vernacular medium of education by Calcutta University in 1918 (Bomjan, 2008:52). Although it was a joint effort by scholars from Benares, Kathmandu and Darjeeling, the renaming of *Khas Kura* as Nepali and its identification and association with a community of diverse tongues, was one of the first formal steps towards the creation of a homogenous Nepali identity (Chalmers, 2003).

According to Hutt (1997:113-14) the emergence of a cohesive ‘Nepali’ identity among Nepalis in India dates back no further than 1924 with the founding of the *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan* (Nepali Literature Association). The Association formally adopted the name Nepali for the language over other different names which were used and as the chairperson of the inaugural meeting said,

‘...the word ‘Nepali’ has a broad meaning. It refers to all races (*jati*) of Nepal-Magar, Gurung, Kirati, Newar, Limbu and so on- and indicates that these and all the other races here are parts of a great Nepali nation (*rastra*)..Nepali nowadays is like a lingua franca in the Himalayan region (*prades*). Although the people living in this region speak different tongues (*boli*), there is no one who does not understand Nepali..and no race can claim that this language (*bhasa*) belongs to it alone’(Pradhan, 1982:37-9 in Hutt, 1997:117).

Through the initiative of the Association the language was also systematised in terms of spelling and grammar in the early 20th century with publications of dictionaries and other books (Pradhan, 1984). While the notion of a Nepali *jati* had taken roots in the Darjeeling hills in the early twentieth century, the Nepalis who had migrated to Sikkim were living under a Bhutia monarchy and thus, the proliferation of Nepali language and literature was limited. Nonetheless Sikkim has made important contributions to the development and popularity of Nepali language and literature in general and most specifically through the institutional recognition that it brought to the language in India.²⁷

Although poetic works like Santabrave Limbu's *Adriat Darshan* (1940) was published in *Uday*, the Benares based journal, it was only after the formation of the *Apatan Sahitya Parishad*²⁸ in 1947 that language and literature took an organized form in Sikkim (Chettri, 1999:22). The *Parishad*'s first literary contribution was *Indrakil Pushpanjali* (collection of poems) in 1950 and the *Parishad* had association with famous literary figures from Nepal like Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Bal Krishna Sama. It was an apolitical and non-communal organization, formed by people of different ethnic groups united through literature.

Other literary associations arose after the establishment of the *Apatan Sahitya Parishad* like the *Akhil Sikkim Chattra Vidyarthi Sammelan* (All Sikkim Students Association) circa 1956-57 which published a journal called 'The Pole Star'. There were also other journals like the 'Triveni' and 'Kanchenjunga' published in 1957 which later became the newsletter of the Sikkim State Congress Party. In 1963 the *Sikkim Sahityakar Sampark Samiti* was established which published *Sunakhari* in which prominent literary figures like I.B.Rai,²⁹ Agam Singh Giri³⁰ published their work. The *Yuva Pustalaya Sikkim* (Youth Library Sikkim) was established in 1964 with its journal called *Nav Jyoti* and was a leading organizer of the braveth anniversary of Adikavi Bhanu Bhakta in Sikkim.

In 1981 the *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Sikkim* was established which later became *Sikkim Sahitya Parishad*. It published the journal *Kanka* and in 1985 also established the coveted 'Bhanu Puraskar', a literary award given for contributions to Nepali literature. The *Parishad* also made immense contributions to what is known as *bhasa andolan* or the agitation for the recognition of Nepali as one of the official languages of India which was awarded in 1992 (ibid: 22-58). Thus, along with Darjeeling, Sikkim also made important contributions to establishment of the political legitimacy of the Nepalis of India.

The conscious use and categorisation of a community as 'Nepali' was first experienced outside of Nepal and provided the Nepali state with a concept around which to mould Nepali nationalism. Though the community was headed by an elite group, development of Nepali as the *lingua franca* in Darjeeling completed the process of internal homogenisation amongst the diverse ethnic groups, thereby creating the Nepali *jati*, an identity which all could claim to belong to. On the other hand construction of the Nepali nation was a state oriented project which was conducted by subjugating the

language and culture of numerous ethnic groups. However, these developments, which were crucial to the development of the Nepali identity, have also ossified the discourse and analysis of the Nepalis as a monolithic, homogenous entity, which is contrary to contemporary reality.

While ethnic and cultural identity might be a cross-border phenomenon, a crucial aspect of political identity is that of belonging to a certain political unit or a state. Thus, the Nepali identity, which exists in two different political units at the same time, has led to problems of citizenship and social acceptance for Nepalis living in India. As identities come to be strictly defined and compartmentalized by political boundaries the Nepali identity finds itself incompatible with the larger Indian identity. The cultural bridges which once joined the migrants to their home, Nepal, are now seen as impediments to their complete integration and acceptance as Indians.

Homogenisation of the Nepalis and its impact on identity formation

Kakarivitta is one the most frequently used official Indo-Nepal border crossing owing to its close proximity to the neighbouring hills of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Siliguri, one of the biggest commercial hubs in northern West Bengal. Hundreds of people cross this border every day and trade, legal as well as illicit thrives in this border-town. No paperwork or visa is required for Indians or Nepalese citizens unlike in neighbouring Bhutan where Bhutanese authorities enforce stringent rules of entry and exit for Indian as well as Nepalese citizens.

Despite, what may seem as a straightforward and safe way to cross the border, there is a distinct sense of hesitation in those who are making the journey to India for the first time. At the end of my fieldwork, I invited two of my female friends from eastern Nepal to visit me in Gangtok. The initial excitement quickly dissipated and gave way to the fear of crossing the border on their own. While representing the demarcation between two political units, movement across the border also meant leaving all that was familiar and safe towards something unknown. Their fear was, in part, fuelled by narratives of trafficking of Nepalese women across Kakarivitta by Indians in connivance with their Nepalese counterparts. It was a valid reason for them to not risk the journey and their

rationale could not be simply reduced to the fear of the unknown or the ethnic 'other'. Rather, it has to be understood as one of the many manifestations of the unequal relationships between India and Nepal, one that renders Nepalese citizens (especially the poor) invisible and vulnerable to exploitation once they enter India, while the reverse is not always true of Indian citizens.

By extension, this is an experience that is not alien to the vast number of Indian-Nepalis who leave their hills, cross local, regional, national borders and travel to the Indian heartland. This form of inequality is based on the ethnic homogeneity of the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya which has been extended to political homogeneity as expressed by the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 (Gaenszle, 2002:86). The Treaty defined and institutionalized the relationship between two nations whereby 'non-discriminatory national treatment of the citizens of both the sides in economic and cultural affairs' has been established. However, this Treaty, especially Article 7 which has provisions for the citizens of both the countries to travel, work and live freely in India and Nepal has been criticized by Nepalis living on either side of the border. The Nepalese citizens see the Treaty as symbolising India's hegemony and an infringement of their political sovereignty while Indian-Nepalis remain resentful of the Treaty because it entitles them to all the rights 'like' Indian citizens which Nepalis from Nepal are also entitled to and not 'as' Indian citizens, an annoyance evidenced by the symbolic burning of the Treaty in Darjeeling in 1986 and more recently in 2007. This eventually 'relegates them to a cul-de-sac' and justifies them being treated as foreigners in their own country (Subba, 2007:200).

Despite inherent hesitations and anxieties, thousands of people cross the Indo-Nepal border at various points and while demarcation of political boundaries might have regulated their movements, in no way has it hampered their cross-border movement as the international border remain porous and easily accessible. The majority of the migrants are engaged in menial, low income services which are usually 'difficult, dirty and dangerous' (Seddon et al, 2002:26; Thieme and Boker, 2003:343-346). Another set of migrants are retired Indian Gurkhas soldiers who pursue various forms of wage labour, usually as watchmen or security guards. In Indian cities, employment of Nepalis, known as *bahadur* (brave), as watchmen is not only 'fashionable' and 'desirable' (Dixit, 1997;

Sinha, 2007:361) but also has come to form serious stereotypes about the Nepalis and is often used as a common anti-Nepali slander which is reproduced in Hindi cinema, where Nepalis are portrayed as ‘awkward and comical’ and being a Nepali is also often equated with being a prostitute, a guard or a servant (Sherstova, 2010:313). Apart from Nepalese migrants a large number of Indian-Nepalis also migrate to urban Indian cities for education or professional employment. In these cities ethnic stereotyping and discrimination is enacted everyday and ranges from downright refusal to accept the citizenship of India-Nepalis to being harassed racially. The stereotype of the Nepali that is prevalent in the national imagery has no room for a distinction between Nepalis from Nepal and Indian-Nepalis, despite the fact that the majority of Nepalis in India are Indian-Nepalis for whom Nepal forms a background to the stories of their ancestors but in terms of political connection or attachment is as distant as Bangladesh or Bhutan (Subba, 2002: 120).

Sikkim, east Nepal and Darjeeling experienced immigration and settlement at different times and under different socio-economic conditions. Movement of people continues even today and has an impact on how people experience their social and political realities. The experience of Nepalis living in these three areas highlights how members of the same ethnic group-Nepali, which was constructed in India and indoctrinated through education in Nepal, use their ethnic identity differently in order to attain different socio-political goals, the articulation and manifestation of which is determined by the institutional structures under which different ethnic groups live. The following section illustrates the different existential and political circumstances that have given shape to the politics of being a Nepali in the eastern Himalaya.

1.1 Identifying the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya

Gorkhaland: A homeland for the Indian-Nepalis

From a sparsely populated hillock occupied by local Lepcha, Magar and Limbu villages to one of the famous hill stations in India, Darjeeling's origins are steeped in the history of the British Raj. The present district of Darjeeling in northern West Bengal was carved out of the territories that belonged to the Himalayan kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan. Success of tea and cinchona³¹ plantations made Darjeeling an important site of colonial investment, leading to its eventual and permanent colonization as a frontier town.

The plantation enterprise, recruitment in the British army and the establishment of numerous other industries was instrumental in attracting different ethnic groups, primarily from eastern Nepal, who were fleeing indebtedness and economic suppression under the neighbouring Gorkha monarchy. Labourers for tea plantations in Darjeeling, the terai and the Duars areas of present day North Bengal were recruited from eastern Nepal and tribal areas of Jharkhand by agents, who received commission upon successful recruitment and establishment of the labourers in different blocks (*dhura*) (Sharma, 1997:5). All aspects of the lives of the labourers and correspondingly, the economy and polity of the Darjeeling hills was controlled by the head administrator (*burra sahib*) which had a stifling impact on the socio-political development of the hills.

The period from 1907-1935 can be seen as the first phase of political initiative by the elites of Darjeeling albeit without the formal formation of any political parties. Although an elitist endeavour in its initial stages, organisations like Kalimpong Samiti, Nepali-Bhutial-Lepcha Association, Hillmen's Association and Gorkha Dukkha Nibarak Sammelan played a crucial role in galvanising inter-ethnic amity and initiating a degree of political awareness by discussing the issue of a separate administrative set-up in the public sphere. The demand for a separate administrative unit comprising of the Darjeeling hills and a section of the Jalpaiguri district, which had been annexed from Bhutan in 1865, was first placed in 1917 by a small congregation of the educated elites of the hills called the Hillmen's Association. In spite of the many memorandums submitted to the

British, and then later to the Indian government, neither the demands for the exclusion from Bengal nor for remaining in Bengal with certain constitutional reforms were conceded. This situation was aggravated by the fact that Darjeeling had been segregated from mainland India on the account of its backwardness and distinctiveness meaning that the peoples inhabiting this region were not recognized as citizens of India nor as minorities (Dhakal, 2009:160-161).

In this era of political ambivalence, the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) was formed in 1943 and demanded the separation of Darjeeling district from Bengal, specifically on the basis of the distinct history and culture of the people inhabiting the region (ibid: 86). The Communist Party of India (CPI) had also made inroads into Darjeeling in the early 1940s, which made rampant political mobilisation a permanent feature of tea estates. By 1977, the CPI (M) had already made the tea belt its bastion when it was voted to power in the West Bengal General Elections. In 1986, another political party, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) launched a mass movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland on the basis of Article 3 of the Indian Constitution³² and as a guarantee for the legitimacy of Gorkhas as bona fide citizens of India. It was a demand for self-determination which translated to control over the resources that were being drained out of the hills to the coffers of the state of West Bengal, ethnically represented by the Bengalis. This was opposed by members of the CPI (M) and what started as small skirmishes between the two factions, quickly escalated to full-fledged violence. The treatment of a political problem as a law and order issue led to the escalation of violence and movement evolved into a major anti-government agitation (Subba, 1992; Dasgupta, 1999:66, Banerji, 1986:1721).

The agitation finally ended in 1988 with the creation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), the first autonomous council outside of northeast India, and the recognition of Nepali as the co-official language (with Bengali) of the three hill sub-divisions. However, the DGHC was unsuccessful in eradicating the malaise of unemployment, underdevelopment and poverty. Failure emanated from political infighting and problems with the leadership of Subash Ghising who as the Chairman of the DGHC had no real power or authority as all the crucial decisions were still made in Calcutta.

After a political lull of almost two decades, the Darjeeling hills once again resounded with the demands for a separate state and the catalyst for the renewal of this demand can be attributed to the 'Prashant Tamang phenomenon'.³³ In 2007, Prashant Tamang of Jawahar Busty, Darjeeling participated in a televised singing contest called the Indian Idol wherein the winner is selected on the basis of votes that they receive from the audience. Prashant's participation in the program represented not only his aspirations as a singer but also that of the millions of Indian-Nepalis for recognition and acceptance as citizens of India. In Darjeeling, the campaign for votes, although led by individuals and community members, took a political turn when Bimal Gurung, an aide of Subhas Ghising, took the lead. The euphoria and support lent by Nepalis living all over the world led to Prashant's victory as the Indian Idol and in Darjeeling, the renewal of demand for Gorkhaland by the newly formed Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). The leader of this new political party was Bimal Gurung, who capitalised on the renewed vigour and enthusiasm shown by the masses and channelled it into a political movement.

INSERT PICTURE 2

Darjeeling town, Gorkha Janmukti Flags

Photo: Mona Chettri, 2010

From 2007-2011, the GJM was involved in a homeland movement for the Gorkhas and unlike the 1986 agitation, the GJM engaged in a Gandhian non-violent political campaign in three hill districts and Nepali dominated areas in the duars. In 2011, after a series of negotiations with the central and the state government,³⁴ a political and administrative compromise was reached which led to the formation of the Gorkha Territorial Authority which is similar to the earlier DGHC that it replaces in form and content, except that it is empowered with certain administrative, financial and executive powers related to the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural and linguistic development of the Gorkhas living in the hills. Development in the Darjeeling hills remains stagnant owing to ineffective policies and even worse management. Population growth is not matched by the increase in existing facilities nor the development of newer ones and while there are larger questions of social and political recognition as Indian

citizens, these existential issues also form the core of the ethnic movement in the Darjeeling hills.

De-constructing the Nepali in Sikkim

From 1642-1975, Sikkim was a feudal kingdom which had been territorially consolidated and politically unified by the Namgyal dynasty whose Tibetan lineage and emulation of Tibetan state-craft had made Sikkim into a satellite state of Tibet. Sikkim was the portal for trans-Himalayan trade in the 18th century and later, a buffer zone between India and China. Sikkim's position has therefore always been of keen interest to regional powers, whether it be the colonial British who wanted access to Tibet, or India which wanted to safeguard its northern borders against Chinese incursions. In 1861 Sikkim was made a British Protectorate and after Indian independence in 1947, it became an Associate State of India in 1950. The Sino-Indian war of 1962 however elevated its position as an important frontier state, instigating India to impose a constitution in early 1970s leading to its eventual merger in 1975 (Das, 1983).

Sikkim was never formally colonised by the British but after the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861, the *Chosrgyal* (Dharma Raja) was reduced to a titular head and the office of the Political Officer (PO) was instituted which regulated the affairs of the state. J.C.White came as the first PO of Sikkim in 1889 and established an advisory council, which later came to be known as the State Council. His administrative reforms vested the Kazis, the landowning nobility and the Nepali landlord (*thikadar*) families with extraordinary power and control over the lands, which in turn, reduced the power of the *Chosrgyal* further (see Risley, 1894). Prior to the political demarcation of Sikkim in 1861, political borders were either non-existent or were not strictly enforced which facilitated the movement of people between different areas making it an intrinsic aspect of the cultural, social, economic and religious life of the region.

As described above, migration into Sikkim had also been accentuated by the Gorkha invasion of 1778-79 and the subsequent occupation of Sikkim's western regions for over thirty years contributed to a burgeoning Nepali population. However, large scale migration began in 1871 encouraged by the British Political Officer in Sikkim, J.C.White, with the co-operation of the local Kazi elites and the rich Nepali merchant community,

the Newars (Shrestha, 2005). Settling new tenants and labourers, in spite of the royal decree against it, was a lucrative investment and eventually established Nepalis as the majority ethnic group (Das, 1983:66; Rose, 1978).

The political and administrative structure of the Namgyals revolved around the *Chosrgyal* and his council which was drawn from representatives of the prominent Bhutia, Lepcha and Tsong/Limboo³⁵ clans and the members of the Council were compensated for their services through land grants (Rose, 1978:206; Das, 1983:7). Thus, irrespective of their ethnicity, the majority of the population were either landless or owned poor lands and were caught within a system that institutionalised inequality and provided them with few political rights. The landed elite acted as tax collectors and arbitrators of legal and domestic cases, making their patronage imperative in Sikkim and in turn enabling a dominant minority to institutionalise elaborate patronage networks (Ling, 1985; Nakane, 1966).

This sense of disparity finally manifested itself in the emergence of organized party politics in 1940, with the braveth of the Sikkim National Congress (SNC), the leaders of which were influenced by the Indian struggle for independence. Most of the members of the SNC as well as its leaders were Nepalis of Sikkimese origin giving the contest against the feudal system a definite ethnic tinge (Chakravarthi, 1994:97; Gupta, 1975).

As a measure to stem the growing political discontent, devolution of political power was initiated through the State Council, intrinsic to which was the parity system introduced in 1951 by *Chosrgyal* Tashi Namgyal.³⁶ Discontent against token democracy, feudalism and increasing economic disparity found expression through a political movement led by the SNC which led to a Tripartite Agreement between India, the *Chosrgyal* and the political parties of Sikkim in 1973. This agreement gave wider legislative and executive powers to elected members and introduced adult franchise with one man, one vote principle. Most importantly, this agreement highlighted the growing Indian incursion into the Sikkimese polity as elections were to be conducted under the supervision of the Indian Election Commission and an elected legislative assembly was to be constituted in four years to replace the State Council (Gurung, 2011:54). The first democratically elected government was established in 1973; in 1974 Sikkim became an

Associated State within the Indian Union and in 1975 the State Assembly passed a resolution that abolished the institution of the *Chosrgyal* and declared Sikkim a constituent State of India.³⁷ Under the democratic system leadership swiftly changed from Kazi Lhendup Dorji, the first Chief Minister, to N.B.Bhandari in 1979, resting finally in the hands of P.K.Chamling in 1994, whose break-away party, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) has been at the helm of state since their electoral victory in 1994. Along with other factors, the SDF's success was achieved by capitalizing on the unrest that had been caused by the non-implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, a scheme for positive discrimination introduced by the Indian government in 1991.

The elections of 1994 and the eventual implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report in 1994 were also very important in setting a precedent for future political strategies including the instrumental use of ethnic identity. These developments added a new dimension to the identity politics of the state and especially that of the Sikkimese-Nepali as they are now divided into different categories (OBC, MBC)³⁸ that had been devised and approved by the Central government. The different ethnic groups and the socio-economic categories in Sikkim are:

INSERT TABLE 1

Socio-economic categories in Sikkim

By linking rights to collectivities rather than to individuals, the Constitution of India has made categories like caste, tribe, religion ethnicity open to endless political manipulations (Michelutti, 2014:642). While the ST, SC, MBC or OBC categories may be useful and creative ways of distributing public goods, this mode of ethnic identification has also facilitated the creation of vote banks which can be accessed and mobilised by different political agents. It has also led to the exploration, discovery and essentialisation of identity, which usually implies the revival or creation of the tangible aspects of culture. Despite increasing urbanisation and 'westernization' of values, instrumental aspects like reservations and concessions that come with embracing and enacting ethnic practices cannot be understated or ignored. Thus, the state as the political

agent has led to the creation of a political framework which is receptive and encouraging of ethnic diversity and has placed political agency in the hands of ethnic associations who have now become the gatekeepers to ethnic culture. The state exploits the socio-economic insecurities of the people and channels it through ethnic politics in order to ensure its political security, thereby revealing not only the malleability of Nepali ethnic groups but also their potential for politicisation.

Re-claiming Limbuwan

Ethnic identity has played an important role in defining the society, culture and history of the Limbus of eastern Nepal. Prithvi Narayan Shah's territorial consolidation was complemented by a re-arrangement of the social structure of those living under the Gorkha monarchy. Included within this scheme of integration were the Kirat groups of eastern Nepal (Rai, Limbu, Thami) who, as a result of geographical and cultural distance from the center of power, had previously remained either completely outside or loosely connected to the Kathmandu-centered Gorkha administration. The Kiratis' were animist groups with specific social and religious stratification and limited hierarchy. However, with the institutionalisation of the caste system, they were allocated a position between upper and lower caste Hindus and labelled as *matwalis* or alcohol drinking castes (Pradhan, 1991:161). Positioning on this caste hierarchy provided the basis for a forceful *Hinduization*, a process of enculturation of Hindu religion and customs, of the polity in which the state guaranteed inequality based on one's caste in various sectors of society. Consequently this formed the basis of the discrimination against *matwalis* and dalits.

In addition to the economic impoverishment as a result of conversion of *kipat* lands to *raikar*, the Shah kings also initiated the process of *Nepalization* whereby the values and cultures (language, dress, religion) of upper caste hill Brahmins and Chettris were promoted amongst those who subscribed to different cultures and religions a process which was gradually internalised by the non-Hindu societies (Gaige, 1975:23; Whelpton, 2005).

The intervention of the state in the cultural lives of its citizens continued even after the end of the Rana regime in 1951. It actually intensified during the Panchayat

period (1960-1990)³⁹ which was marked by numerous state strategies that promoted a hill, upper-caste Hindu version of national integration encapsulated in the Panchayati slogan of “*Ek bhasa, ek bhash, ek desh*” (one language, one style of dress, one country) (Gaige, 1975: 23; Whelpton, 2005). On the other hand, the promotion of the Nepali language was done at the cost of other indigenous languages and Nepali became the language of dominance and discrimination against those who were speakers of other languages (Onta, 2006:305-306).

In a bid to garner support and legitimacy from its subjects, the government sanctioned a small degree of political activity which led to the proliferation of numerous ethnic organizations, some of which were supported by the government in an attempt to enlist the ethnic and low caste groups to support the Panchayat regime. This was instrumental in the mobilization of ethnic minorities in opposition to brahmanocracy (*bahunvad*) (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfuss, 2003:6). The Partyless Panchayat faced serious opposition not only from ethnic organisations and political parties but also from a ‘critical mass’ of people who supported democracy (Hacchethu, 2009: 32). This dissatisfaction eventually led to the first Jana Andolan (People’s Movement) in 1990 that brought an end to the Panchayat system and absolute monarchy. The indigenous movement which had begun in the 1950s, gathered momentum with the establishment of democracy in 1990 giving the adivasi/janajati groups the freedom to articulate their concerns and grievances against the state (Whelpton, 2005; Fisher, 2001).

In July 1990 the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh⁴⁰ (Nepal Federation of Nationalities)-which in 2004 became the Nepal Adibasi Janajati Mahasangha (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, NEFIN) - came into existence. The rise in ethnic identity politics was complemented by the emergence of ethnically oriented parties like the Mongol National Organization in eastern Nepal and the Sadbhavana Party (Goodwill Party) in the terai. Principles of popular sovereignty, equality, freedom and cultural rights which the newly democratic country claimed to espouse, combined with the expansion of the international human rights regime, led to the articulation of marginalized and excluded voices (Hacchethu, 2003:233).

Explicit political demands for separate ethnic states, federalism, political representation and linguistic freedom as opposed to the earlier demands of cultural

preservation and the violent articulation of these demands (a trend spearheaded by the Maoists) marks a change in the political scene of Nepal (Lawoti, 2007). While local autonomy and a federal framework had been raised as political demands by various regional groups in 1950 and again in 1990, it became a specific program for the Maoist rebels and gained currency with ethnic activists. These are explicit demands with implicit claims. Every 'homeland' would become one of the states of federal Nepal and with the decentralization of power that comes with federalism, control over and distribution of resources would be in the hands of those who head the federal state.

It is within the ambit of transitional politics that the demand for Limbuwan, a homeland for the Limbus has been raised by various regional parties and Limbu ethnic associations. Although championed by the Maoist during the decade long insurgency, the demand for ethnic homelands had been voiced as early as 1992 by the Karnali Liberation Front which published a booklet on its programmes and objectives on the basis of the historical legend of King Bali's kingdom.⁴¹ Likewise the demand for an independent Magarant in central Nepal was made in 1993 by the Magarant Liberation Front and in the east the demand for the restoration of the historical kingdom of Limbuwan was led by the Limbuwan Mukti Morcha formed in 1986.

Participation by locals in workshops, ethnic rallies which have strong political connotations as well as events organised by political parties is indicative of an interest in politics which is not matched by an equal measure of political knowledge, highlighted by the lack of information, in rural as well as semi-urban areas. Ethnic politics has thus finally created an opportunity for members of ethnic groups to engage at the highest political level, something which has not often been possible before. Given the prevalence of favouritism (especially ethnic) being politically active is almost a necessity in Nepal and this phase of political transition is the opportune moment to be a political participant because even the major parties are making concessions to ethnic demands within their parties due to a proliferation of regional parties,.

Thus, the political promotion of the Limbu identity shows the use of ethnicity in confronting the state or at least those at the helm of the state to demand equal political access and opportunity as well as the equitable distribution of resources.

Conclusion

The socio-political history of the Nepalis provides a comprehensive context against which to understand contemporary politics of the region. This history tells us that the incentives and tools for the enactment of ethnic politics is inherent within the Nepali ethnic group who with their flexible inter-ethnic boundaries, fluid cultures are highly susceptible to politicisation.⁴² Ethnic groups do not fit into neat, homogenised compartments with well-defined boundaries, preconceived loyalties and predictable politics. Instead, they are dynamic collectives responding to the changing economic and political environment around them and it is this common feature in the three areas that contribute to the political exclusivity of the eastern Himalayan borderland.

Ethnic politics is influenced by local political, social and economic structures which leads to a variation in the articulation of ethnic politics. However in the eastern Himalaya, identity based politics is also a regional phenomenon which is facilitated by the presence of the same ethnic group on either side of the border, similar cultural, religious beliefs and practices as well as socio-economic grievances that are sought to be resolved through the instrumental use of identity. The eastern Himalayan region has a rich history both of intense, mostly religious, cultural activity and of political activity, making each an inseparable part of the other. This has accentuated the politicisation of ethnicity which, as this book will discuss, has taken numerous forms in the past as well as the present in a bid to cope with the existential challenges that the people of the eastern Himalaya have to face.

Chapter 2. The ethnic worldview: framing existential grievances

In the winter of 2010 I walked down the dusty road to Labda village(*busty*), a settlement within the Cinchona plantation in Darjeeling district famous in the neighbouring regions for its oranges. It turned out that I had arrived on what turned out to be a historic and memorable day for Labda *busty*. It was for the very first time that a vehicle had reached their village, prior to which locals would have to walk uphill for a fairly long time before they could reach the nearest motorable road. Although it had been a test-drive, the driver of the vehicle was felicitated with traditional silk scarves (*khadas*) and a bottle of liquor followed by impromptu singing and dancing. I stood there amongst the celebratory crowd, amazed at their level of perseverance and patience in the face of numerous hardships and inequality. For them and for the villagers on the opposite hill, the un-metalled road which had been constructed by the government meant ease of connectivity and transport of agricultural produce. The old and the young that I spoke to told me how this was ‘development’, that the dusty road signalled the first step towards catching up with other, more developed areas, a privilege the older generation from Labda *busty* had not lived to experience. This conversation was extremely similar to the numerous others that I had had in east Nepal and Sikkim. Only the context and the location changed but it was ‘development’ that everyone wanted. When probed a little further, the idea of ‘development’ roughly translated to the construction of infrastructure, health and educational facilities and investment in human resources which would enable people to uplift their living standards. The level of ‘development’ was always relative and Sikkim was often cited as a ‘model’ for development. However within Sikkim, while road connectivity and infrastructural development is better than in Darjeeling District or east Nepal, lack of monitoring and accountability in education, health and human resource development has, for many, reduced them to token gestures of development.

These problems vary in scale, context and local political-economic structures but a common, cross-regional feature is the persistence of the language of ethnicity in the articulation of grievances related to development. Problems of infrastructure, unemployment and social security are now articulated as concerns pertaining to certain ethnic collectivities rather than to citizens per se because the state pays attention to

problems only when they are packaged as ethnic and ethnic rights are placed at the centre of public protest and outrage against the state.

Ethnic identity, whilst important in everyday, social contexts now competes with other forms of identification like political affiliation, class and even caste to become an important source of political identification. As a result it is now used as a political resource and has gained much currency in contemporary regional politics. The rise and proliferation of ethnic politics raises questions about the factors as well as the institutions that have propelled ethnic identity to be an important and even an alternative means of collective, political action. Like many other parts of South Asia, the eastern Himalayan region is undergoing social, economic and political transition as a result of changing economic systems, the intrusion of neo-liberalism and its impact on local livelihoods, cultures and societies. The resolution of these problems is also impeded by institutional structures like inadequate infrastructural expansion, poor human resource development and limited dissemination of information prohibiting access to public goods and services.

In Darjeeling and east Nepal, there is a deep, underlying perception that these existential problems have been exacerbated by affiliation to specific ethnic identities which is different to those who are at the helm of the state. On the other hand, in Sikkim, ethnic identity is considered to be a legitimate mode of accessing public goods and benefits, a resource that is being promoted and cultivated by the state itself. These are strong perceptions that shape collective action and initiate political mobilisation. Despite the difference in socio-political history, grievances against the state and their articulation, there was a wide consensus among the people that I met and spoke to during my fieldwork and over the years that it was only with the evocation of ethnic identity and the framing of socio-economic problems as ethnic that any solution to the problems faced by the people in the region could be found. This is evinced by the persistence of demands for separate homelands (in east Nepal and Darjeeling) and/or declaration of certain ethnic groups as Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (in Sikkim).

This attraction towards ethnic collective action is also to be understood against the background of the proliferation of a patronage system wherein only people of the same ethnic group, political party or family members (*afno manchay*) stand to benefit in the system of public re-distribution. This system of 'connections' functions on a scalar level

and by the time it reaches the grassroots, the chances of the economically and politically vulnerable receiving anything is marginally slim. The historical presence of patronage networks, whether ethnic or political and the pre-existing repertoire of contentions have informed the world-view of the people and modes of grievance articulation in the eastern Himalaya. Therefore, political contestation has had to take an ethnic form in order to galvanize public opinion which in turn has also affected public imaginings and expectations from a democratic system.

Political rallies and road-blocks were and still are a common mode of protesting against the discrimination being meted against the Limbus of east Nepal and Gorkhas of Darjeeling district. For those participating in these events, a lot of time is spent sitting around, talking and in the case of road-blocks, stopping the occasional vehicle that passes by. On the other hand, these events are also interesting political spaces which bring different people and opinions together. Conversing with and listening to political activists and ordinary people in different rallies and roadblocks both in eastern Nepal and Darjeeling exposed numerous grievances against the state, especially its inherent ethnic bias, developmental promises and failures to deliver those; the remedy to which could be found in a separate homeland. However, there was not a single voice from amongst those I interacted with who called for the total dismantling and re-working of the institutional and governing structures. It was widely agreed that it was only the state apparatus that could solve economic and political problems. The centrality of the state in the lives of its citizens and the inimitable position that it occupied in the matrix of power relations highlighted that the aim of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya was not to de-stabilise the existing political and institutional structures. Rather, it is an attempt to ensure political success and eventually secure greater control over resources that the state regulated.

The guiding framework, motivation and necessary end of all political activity in the Himalayan region is control over the allocation of economic and political goods and Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal are no exception to this trend. In this model of politics, the state has complete 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 ethnic considerations leading to inequitable distribution and complete denial of these goods for certain groups. There also exists regional variation in

the distribution as well as negotiation patterns between ethnic groups and the state. Modes of negotiation with the state differ on the basis of local political structures as well as various regional, national and international regimes within which these areas are ensconced.

Despite the difference in the social, historical and political contexts of Sikkim, Darjeeling and eastern Nepal, there is an emergence of a common political trend of wherein political negotiations have assumed a distinct ethnic character and arguments over access and right to public goods are presented as denial of ethnic rights. Therefore, when denial or fulfilment of rights are articulated as being dependent on ethnic identity, political agency is also expressed in ethnic terms.

On the other hand, the articulation of socio-economic grievances as ethnic is influenced by the state and its response to ethnic claims. The state also understands and reciprocates in the language of ethnicity as it facilitates ethnic consensus building and more often than not, the creation of ethnic vote banks. For instance, in east Nepal and Darjeeling, it was the refusal to accommodate claims for official recognition of ethnic diversity that fuelled identity based movements, while in Sikkim the launching of ethnic claims was encouraged, facilitated and sustained by the state. The ethnic character of the state and its ancillary institutions play an important role in legitimizing the ethnic approach. Thus, the state and ethnic groups are interconnected through their mutual use of ethnic identity in politics and there exists a broad structure for the re-distribution of economic and political goods which acts as the ultimate driving force behind ethnic politics.

This chapter discusses different aspects of the relationship between the polity, economy and territory all of which illustrate the ethnic framework through which these existential problems are understood. The attempt is not to generalise and disregard the presence of objective, apolitical perspectives but to illustrate the importance of the ethnic worldview which has gained political legitimacy within local political discourse.

Ethnic identity cuts across other forms of belonging like gender, class, religious affiliation and at the same time can act as a source of discontent amongst different ethnic groups. It may not be the only frame through which people understand their position and socio-economic grievances, whether they be real or perceived but it is definitely one that

has gained a lot of political traction over the last decade. The following sections of the chapter focus on the three different areas which despite the disparity in their local context are unified by their use of the ethnic template in the articulation of grievances.

Limbus of eastern Nepal and the politics of 'jati and nose'

'Kathmandu does not understand our problems'⁴³ was an oft repeated sentiment in the rural hills of east Nepal which is more than 250 km away from Kathmandu. This was the expression used to relay the perception about the city and the political centre of the country as being far removed, geographically and otherwise, from the problems of its rural citizens. Yangnam is one of the villages in Panchthar district of east Nepal and is closer to the western borders of Sikkim than to Kathmandu. It is seven hours away on foot from the district headquarter (*sadar mukam*) of Phidim and the basic, un-metalled road connecting this pre-dominantly Limbu village to the district headquarter (*sadar mukam*) is not accessible by road for extended periods of the year owing to inadequate maintenance, especially during the monsoon. Most of the families in the area are engaged in cardamom, paddy and maize cultivation and for a large part of the year, movement of people and the transportation of their agricultural produce involves a long, arduous journey through the winding hills of east Nepal. Phidim, although small, offers amenities like a health-post, schools, clothes, general provisions, books, transport connectivity to other areas and recreation in its 'video halls' where people sit on compact stalls and watch Nepali films projected on a small screen.

Yangnam on the other hand has very few of these 'facilities'. Most of the roads have been constructed by the local community, there is a token Nepali medium high school, no electricity and extremely poor sanitary facilities. Agriculture is the primary occupation of the people but they receive very little support or monetary assistance from the state. Apart from the lack of infrastructure, the area also suffers from regional disparity in information. Given the condition of the roads, newspapers would take days to reach (if at all) and because there is no electricity or satellite connection, there are no televisions. The only source of information is the radio (national as well as local) making locals mere recipients of information and not necessarily active contributors to ongoing discussions, apart from

those at a very local level. Interest in politics is not matched by an equal amount of political knowledge, information which in turn complicates the transitions that one will have to make in order to be a complete participant in the political process.

This experience is true not only of Yangnam, which is actually relatively better connected than many other rural areas in eastern Nepal but their position on the periphery of the nation-state has distanced the population, literally as well as metaphorically, from the Kathmandu based administration leading people to feel continually sidelined, neglected and ignored by the state. The political and cultural disconnect from the capital is contradicted by the geographical and cultural connection with neighbouring Sikkim prompting unfavourable comparisons with the living and working conditions across the border. This in turn, has been instrumental in elevating expectations from the Nepalese state in regard to the provision of goods and services and concomitantly, fostered relative deprivation that provides a fertile breeding ground for condemnation of the state.

According to World Bank statistics, with a population of twenty-seven million people and a per capita income of \$730 (in 2014),⁴⁴ Nepal remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 145 out of 187 countries on the Human Development Index.⁴⁵ This is a figure supported by the 2011 Nepal Living Standards Survey⁴⁶ which reported that 25.16 percent of the Nepalese population were living below the poverty line. With a quarter of Nepal's population living in abject poverty, there is intense pressure on the state to provide basic welfare measures and to expand its other developmental targets. This has created a vacuum in the delivery of public goods which is filled by a burgeoning presence of international donors. Aid accounts for 22 per cent of the government budget and half of the government's capital expenditure. Total foreign aid was estimated to be around \$1 billion per year and rising⁴⁷ thereby promoting what has come to be known as a 'donor regime' which also replicates the patriarchal networks in the recruitment, promotion and disbursement of aid. Apart from the perpetuation of clientalist networks, this has also absolved the state from its duties and hence worsened the plight especially of those living in rural areas where neither the state nor these donor agencies reach.

There is minimal presence of the state in the everyday life of its citizens and even where the state is present, common administrative norms include slow decision making processes, high levels of secrecy, ritualised official work and the influence of informal

sources rather than formal rules in decision-making. In addition there exists spatial as well as power distances between superior and sub-ordinates and centralised and non-participatory decision making processes (Dangal, 2005). All of this has led to the enhancement of the patron-client network and enabled the functionaries of the government from the highest civil servant to the clerk, to establish themselves as the focal point in the matrix of distribution of resources (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008:90). This position is further accentuated by the fact that in most parts of Nepal, governmental agencies remain the only providers of such goods and service. Thus, while the state as a provider reinforces its focal role, the officials create or strengthen semi-clientalist structures in which informal networks bind clients to them (Fox, 1994 in Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1993: 177).

Clientalism is pervasive in Nepalese administration and the roots of this clientalist structure can be traced back to the formation of the kingdom itself as Nepal was historically administered through a complex tenurial system of state landlordism (Riaz and Basu, 2007:133). The problems generated by clientalism are exacerbated by ethnic networks of patronage, evident through disproportional representation of upper caste Chhetri and Bahun (*Brahmin*) groups in the public sector. For instance, elite caste groups occupied ninety-eight percent of top positions in 1854 and still occupied ninety-two percent of top administration position in the mid-1990s. In 1999 members of upper caste hill Hindu groups occupied around seventy percent of the positions in the legislature, judiciary and administration (Lawoti, 2007:23). Thus, instead of being neutral and impartial, the most important and pervasive extensions of the state are ethnically biased and the inability to build patronage networks has resulted in the majority of the indigenous/ethnic (*adivasi/janajati*) groups being completely left out of the system of re-distribution.

According to Karma Sherpa, an executive member of NEFIN, 'the Chhetri and Brahmins got the cream of the country when the Ranas were ruling, they got the cream of the country when the King was ruling and now they want the cream of the country when it is a republic. This is the trick of the Chhetri and Bahuns'. The feeling of having been being the tricked into an inferior social, economic and political position by the clever upper caste groups and the systematic perpetuation of this inequality was a sentiment that was freely expressed by few in public but covertly admitted to in numerous private conversations.

Economic deprivation and an inability to access public goods was attributed to ethnic discrimination rather than development failures on the part of the state. Personal testimonies of state supported ethnic discrimination exuded an intense, mixed feeling of desperation and contempt against the state. Hemant Jabegu, a hotel owner in Phidim belonged to a relatively well-off strata of society and yet was quite explicit about his opinion on state-led ethnic discrimination. He said, 'the country should belong to all citizens but in this country there is only one caste(*jat*) which has everything. They are the ones who get all government jobs, they are the ones who go to America to study, and all ministerial posts go to them. They are in all the fields so if they are going to be the only beneficiaries, then members of the other groups will not have the incentive to live and sweat in this country. A *Bahun*'s son may get the chance to be an accountant whether by paying bribe, giving gifts, running errands (*chakari*) or through political connections but the indigenous (*adivasi*) Limbu's son has no chance and thus he is forced to go to other countries to work and suffer.'

The conspicuous absence of young and middle-aged men in all the villages that I travelled to in eastern Nepal seemed to legitimise Hemant's anger. Unemployment has had serious repercussions for the social and cultural life of rural east Nepal as steady migration to Kathmandu and other towns in Nepal as well as to India and the Middle East had become a norm amongst men and women who either did not see a lucrative future in agriculture or thought that they did not stand a chance in getting a government employment (*sarkari jagir*).

INSERT TABLE 2

Distribution of Dominant Castes (Chettri-Bahun) and Minorities in key positions in 1999. *Source: Bhattachan (2008:43).*

Nepal ko kanun, Pashupati lay Janun (only Pashupati [Shiva] knows what Nepal's laws are) was a common attitude prevalent in eastern Nepal given the lack of implementation of a standard set of rules, its varying interpretations and its flexibility upon political pressure. Thus, in Nepal, the most efficient way of getting work done is through personal (ethnic, familial or political) connections, giving presents, running errands) and

since the bureaucracy lacks political neutrality, through political connections. Social hierarchy and inequality is embedded within the administrative and political structure of the state, leading to a situation of existential crisis for the majority of the members of the lower caste and indigenous/ethnic (*adivasi/janajati*) groups who are unable to create and sustain patron-client networks in order to access the very limited benefits and facilities intended for them.

In Yangnam, a group of young Limbu boys were quick to point out that ethnic discrimination was very real and relevant in their lives. In their Village Development Committee (VDC), there was not even a single Limbu officer (*hakim*) a situation similar to that of the VDC in Ilam, where out of thirty-seven employees, there were only four members of staff who belonged to the indigenous/janajati (*adivasi/janajati*) category while the rest were upper caste Hindus. Shekhar Lama, one of the four employees, was of the opinion that the primary reasons for the unemployment of the indigenous/ethnic groups was a combination of their lack of perseverance and preparation as well as their inability to engage in bribery and sycophancy (*chaplusi*) which is important, whether overtly or otherwise, in order to attain the desired result. Indeed, attempts at sycophancy by indigenous/ethnic members are in fact thwarted by their lack of the ethnic affiliation that enables the establishment of 'connections' in the first place.

In east Nepal, the prevalence of brahmanocracy (*bahunvad*) was widely acknowledged as a systemic impediment made profuse by the unitary nature of the state and the vast bureaucratic network that expands outwards from Kathmandu. Unemployment remains one of the biggest problems faced by the youth in eastern Nepal who are keen to move beyond agriculture and into white-collar jobs but are confounded by a bureaucratic structure which is unrepresentative of local Limbu population and the inner workings of which remains unfamiliar to those without “connections”. The ethnic character of the bureaucracy acts as an impediment to many aspirants as circulation of information regarding openings and trainings is either tightly controlled by upper caste members who are employed in different government offices, sometimes it is not relayed at all or the circumstances for application are made difficult. This particular aspect of the bureaucracy was confirmed by an official from the VDC in Ilam who felt that apart from other social and economic factors, the chances of indigenous/ethnic students were also

hampered by the lack of information that they received owing to their lack of ‘connections’ in an office or institution.

Young Limbu men and women were more vocal about their experiences of ethnic discrimination than the older generation who had lived and worked in relative isolation in the eastern hills for almost all their lives without much disturbance and interaction with the state. However, the exigencies of the younger generation is different, as they do not have a choice but to engage with the state and the wider global economy. Keshav Raj Chemjong,⁴⁸ member of the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, *Vidyarthi Manch* (Student’s Forum) was convinced that partiality on the basis of ‘*jati* and nose’⁴⁹ was prevalent in all government offices as well as organisations, albeit in a covert fashion. For instance, the Nepali army recruitment rules were perceived as discriminatory as the required height for the army was a little more than that of the average Limbu thereby tilting the balance in favour of the Chettri-Bahun candidates.

Corroborating claims of systemic ethnic discrimination, Kumar Sunwar, a senior executive member of an ethnic association in Ilam related how his attempts to clear the civil exams had ended in failure and frustration. He attributed his failure to the particular, ethnically biased nature of the question papers. He recollected how there would invariably be questions on different elements of Hinduism or Hindu culture which had to be answered in Nepali. Unfamiliarity with Hindu tradition, myths and practices and the inability to express himself in Nepali put Kumar at a disadvantage from the outset in comparison to upper caste candidates who were conversant with Hindu traditions and fluent in Nepali. My *matwali* friends, informants and respondents strongly believed that the system, therefore, was designed to defeat them even before they could begin to compete.

This systematic, overt suppression of equal opportunities also contributed to the imagery of the state as insular, parochial and definitely ethnically biased. What came across through all my conversations with a wide spectrum of people, *matwali*, non-*matwali*, men and women, was that it was not the endemic poverty and underdevelopment that angered them the most but the lack of political will on the part of their political representatives to change the prevailing status quo. They saw the state as being burdened and hindered in its functioning by an administrative system that was engrossed in its self-perpetuation and preservation through a patronage system which was

maintained through cultural institutions like *chakari* and *afno-manchay*. This in turn acted as an obstacle to the upward mobility of some sections of society and created impediments to the access of public goods.

A strong and recurrent opinion amongst most Limbu respondents was that their political and economic 'backwardness' was a result not of their own shortcomings but because they had been systematically relegated to that position by the state. Whether real or perceived, these emotions of being ethnically discriminated against played an important role in constructing the world-view of the Limbus of the eastern hills which helped them contextualise their socio-economic condition as well as their relationship with the state.

Discriminating against the sons of the soil- the Gorkhas of Darjeeling

Like in eastern Nepal, inability to access resources and/or partake in meaningful political participation was also evident in Darjeeling which in 2003 featured in the Indian Planning Commission's '100 most backward Districts' (Aiyar, 2003: 21). Akin to Nepal 18.1 percent of the population of Darjeeling district lived below the poverty line and 5.3 percent of the households went hungry (Debroy and Bhandari, 2003: Appendix). Ironically, according to the Human Development Report 2004,⁵⁰ Darjeeling District is ranked as having the second highest per capita income (Rs. 18,529) after Kolkata. This paradox can be attributed to the increase in the trade commerce and real estate investment in Siliguri⁵¹ and the profits of the tea industry which neither trickles down to the large numbers of workers who live in poverty⁵² nor contributes to the development of the Darjeeling hills.

According to the Economic Review (2011-12: 112) published by the Finance Department, Government of West Bengal, a large percentage of the working population (75.20 percent) in Darjeeling district is engaged in non-agricultural work (including tea-estate workers) while only 14.59 percent of the working population are engaged as cultivators while an even lower percentage (10.21 percent) were working as agricultural labourers.

Tea-plantations are a dominant part of the physical imagery of the Darjeeling landscape. Most of these plantations are owned by absentee landlords and the gardens often change hands between companies who are primarily interested in the extraction of profit

over a short period of time (Tirkey, 2005). Land is either leased by the government to private tea companies, owned by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Private (at least the stretch from Siliguri to Darjeeling) or is under the West Bengal Forest Department. Ownership of non-estate land is extremely rare in the District especially in Darjeeling and Kurseong sub-districts which have major tea and cinchona plantations. Kalimpong sub-division on the other hand could not be developed as a colonial plantation due to the impossibility of connecting it to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway line, which facilitated private ownership of land. This has enabled the locals, who engage in agriculture, floriculture and other cottage industries, to form an amorphous and varied class rather than a homogenous class of plantation workers.

Plantation workers and their families have been living on tea-estates for generations. They are allotted small plots with no possibility of expansion or ownership of the land on which they live. Minimum governmental assistance and interventions in the tea-estates has left them at the mercy of the owners of the tea-garden. Walking around plantation estates in the Duars and Darjeeling, what struck me most was the congested living areas in the estates with poor security, roads and minimal infrastructure. While workers in the hills had small plots for vegetable gardens, Nepali workers in the Duars lived in crowded rows of houses next to their adivasi neighbours with very little space to use as a courtyard and in both areas, the plot of land on which they lived was not and could never be theirs to own.⁵³

Lack of land ownership is a constant source of anxiety amongst those living on the estates. Bishnu Sharma had worked and lived on Duncan tea-estate for over thirty-seven years. He was approaching retirement when I visited him at his house in Bagrakot and our conversation about this living conditions revealed a palpable sense of insecurity which was reminiscent of numerous such exchanges on other plantations that I had visited. Economic insecurity loomed large in front of Bishnu Sharma. He said, 'the day I retire I will get a letter from the manager saying thank you for working so hard for us but please evacuate the quarter in six months. I have given my sweat and blood to this tea-estate but I have nothing. Where will I go?' Bishnu Sharma was of the opinion that his economic insecurity, which was common to many like him was also directly related to his political status as an Indian-Nepali. Citing lack of political agency of those attached to plantation he said 'we are

territorially bound to the plantation and thus our politics is limited and because we are in Bengal, very little of our grievances are heard. This is Bengal and there will be Bengali-ism, isn't it?

Bishnu Sharma summarised succinctly the fears and anxiety that was discernible in conversations and outlook amongst the Nepalis that I had spent time with in small towns like Bagrikot and Banarhat. Living as a minority community, the Nepalis there did not enjoy the political support and bravado that comes with being a majority population like in the hills. The Nepalis in the Duars had to face different types of constraints on their economic and political development. Apart from everyday existential issues, the flight of Nepalis from Meghalaya and Assam and the expulsion of the Bhutanese-Nepalis/Lhotsampas⁵⁴ has infused fear and insecurity amongst people like Bishnu who are rightful citizens of India. While forces of capitalism has reduced them to powerless labourers, the state and its ethnic biases has made them politically inconsequential (they were useful as vote-banks but did not have enough political influence to bring substantial changes in their) thereby leading to a decline in what Bishnu described as their mental strength (*mano-bal*).

This dependency on the tea estates for land to live on as well as livelihood has led to what Naren Chettri, environmentalist and tea entrepreneur, calls a 'culture of poverty and dependency' owing to the lack of socio-economic capital, a trend that extends beyond the tea gardens and spreads across the Darjeeling hills. Tea plantations hold relevance in the context of everyday life for almost everyone living in the Darjeeling hills. On one hand, it remains one of the largest employers and on the other, it is a site of deprivation and discrimination which has deep-roots in a colonial history of exploitation and extraction. This history of colonisation and its continuation under new economic and political surroundings plays an important role in the politics of the region and hence, the continual relevance of tea estates even for those who are not directly connected to it.

In uncanny similarity to what was practiced during the colonial era, all the tea grown in Darjeeling or Duars is taken to auction houses in Calcutta where it is branded, auctioned and sold leaving the tea labourers as mere labourers with no stake in any other level of tea production apart from plucking and processing the leaves in the factories. The tea gardens which are managed by the West Bengal Tea Development Corporation have become leading examples in the denial of the statutory rights of the workers and of

non-compliance of the provisions of the Plantations Labour Act 1951⁵⁵ and therefore a model for private tea companies (Bomjan, 2008:21).

Local tea estate managers are a rarity, much to the annoyance of local workers as evinced by the frustration of the union members of Happy Valley TE who were vociferous in their complaints that, 'the auction houses are in Kolkata and thus the people working in Kolkata get bigger posts while we remain labourers forever. Big, well placed people sit in those auction houses but they have never even seen a tea bush in their lives while we who are born and brought up here never get a chance'. These voices were united in how they articulated their problems of human resource development, their aspirations and right to a decent life. The framework used was not simply of economic exploitation but that of extraction and socio-political subjugation by the ethnic other (usually a Bengali, Marwari or other 'Indians') who owned and/or controlled the means of production. Ethnicity coincided with class to produce a lethal socio-economic structure that subjugated the worker and was responsible for their debilitating economic circumstances. While the economic and political rights of those living on the estates have remained elusive, deprivation has become a way of life and can be attributed to the neo-capitalistic structures that are at work in Darjeeling. The state is conspicuous by its absence especially in the tea-estates (*kaman*) which have become a breeding ground for estate culture promoted through a psyche of subservience and dependency on the factory for livelihood, health, education and food.

Tea estates have always been at the heart of local and regional politics owing to the concentration of a large number of people in a single location as well as the persistence of grievances that can be easily politicised. Politically affiliated trade unions are a common feature in the tea gardens, which of late have been also divided on ethnic lines with the GJM supposedly representing specific economic and political interests of the Nepalis, especially in the Duars. Economic problems were severe, real and seemed to be a cycle that the workers could not break away from which led Vishu Bhujel, another plantation worker to equate life on the plantation with slavery. Given how static their lives were, the deplorable living conditions and the sad resignation at the immutability of their circumstances, it was not difficult to understand how this would weaken their mental strength (*mano-bal*).

Absence of the state is more noticeable outside the estates through the rapidly deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate housing and health services, perennial shortage of water, lack of civic services and security. While many 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 medical emergencies, or at least those who can afford it, to be transferred to private nursing homes in Siliguri. Scarcity of water is another major problem in almost all the areas of the District which do not have a natural source of running water or springs nearby. Darjeeling town epitomizes this problem. Dependent on the water reservoirs that were built by the British in 1910 and 1932 for a town with a population of ten thousand, modern day Darjeeling, with a population of over 120, 414 (2011 census), suffers major water shortages throughout the year.

Apart from low wages in the tea estates and lack of infrastructural development, unemployment is one of the biggest problem faced by the people of the hills. As a result, from selling bottled chillies and vegetables on the way to Darjeeling to innovative home-stay projects in Lava, Kalimpong,⁵⁶ few employment avenues remain unexploited by the enterprising population. Darjeeling is marketed as the 'Queen of Hills' but tourism is restricted to only a small area thereby limiting its impact on local employment. Writing in the context of tourism, T.B Subba (1989:312) says, 'the majority of the employees and almost all the top ranking officers in the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation⁵⁷ being Bengali, the sense of participation among the locals in the promotion of tourism does not match expectations. The locals generally get employment as photographers, or as taxi and bus drivers.' Apart from the lack of participation at the policy-making level, this thriving industry has also taken a setback as a result of the logistical uncertainties and threats of strikes raised by the political agitation for Gorkhaland, poor infrastructure and inadequate resources with tourists choosing nearby Sikkim or Bhutan over Darjeeling.

The problem of unemployment is exacerbated by that of underemployment. Darjeeling district has the highest literacy rate (72.9 per cent) in West Bengal after Kolkata (HDR, 2004:148). Rising unemployment prompts men as well as women to migrate either to neighbouring Sikkim⁵⁸ or to other Indian cities in search for employment in call centres if educated or as domestic servants, nannies and assistants in beauty parlours if uneducated. Ringit Lepcha, a young GJM activist, described the out-migration of the young and

educated to different Indian cities in order to work in call centres as a 'brain-drain of the society.' He complained of the lack of new positions or the appointment to vacant ones as being ridden with systemic impediments that have been put in place by the Bengali state. While government jobs are difficult to find in general, top administrative positions are occupied by officers from the Indian Civil Services and the West Bengal Civil Services, who are often recruited from different parts of the country. Barring a handful of ST/SC candidates there are very few non-Bengalis who are civil servants or who occupy high positions in the government (Bomjan, 2008:33).

This perception of an absent, exploitative state was strengthened by an ethnic framework through which all these problems were understood. Two generations of Kunga Tamang's family had worked and lived on the Happy Valley TE. Contrary to family tradition Kunga worked as a driver, plying trade driving a taxi between Siliguri and Darjeeling. Working outside the estate had become a common trend as working on the plantations was not sufficient to support families. Kunga was quite vocal in his frustration against the ethnic, extractive and exploitative nature of the state. He said, 'Bengal is responsible for our situation today. The way they see us is different, they look at Darjeeling and say my golden Bengal but they do not embrace us as their own.' Elaborating this sentiment of ethnic discrimination, Mahesh Kumar Pradhan, a resident of Bagrakot and an influential Nepali political figure in the Duars explained how getting a job in the army, the Border Security Forces and even the Jharkhand police was easier than getting one with West Bengal police. Apparently, it was not ineptitude but ethnic discrimination that acted as a barrier. Even if the candidates were five-foot tall, their height would be noted down as four foot ten inches, which would make them ineligible immediately.

According to this generally accepted narrative, the state was seen as practicing exclusionary and ethnocentric policies that were designed to sideline the hill people. These voices of frustration and anger also revealed that issues around employment went beyond simple demands for greater investment in human resources to benefit the sons of the soil-the Gorkhas. Thus, while unemployment and underdevelopment were the recurring themes that emerged from conversations in the hills, they were understood only through the framework of ethnic discrimination. The economic and administrative failures of the state were translated into ethnic discrimination which necessitated the demand for a separation

from West Bengal and the formation of Gorkhaland, where the Gorkhas would have more control over their own resources.

The poverty and socio-political backwardness of the hills of Darjeeling district is perceived to be symptomatic of the ethnic prejudice of the Bengali dominated administrative structure against the Nepalis who also comprise the largest ethnic group in the District. The relationship between Kolkata and Darjeeling is viewed as an unequal one between a centre and periphery, based not only on economic deprivation but also ethnic discrimination, which is seen as a reflection of the national prejudice against Nepalis in India. The Kolkata based government has always been deemed to be remote, opaque and unaccountable to the local people. Instances of expulsion from one's party and Parliamentary position [as experienced by members of Parliament R.B. Rai and Dawa Lama, representatives of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha respectively from the CPI (M)] have led to a 'syndrome of inhibition' (Ganguly, 2005: 475; Bomjan, 2008: 25) that strengthens the ethnic rationale further.

While experiences of systemic ethnic discrimination, whether real or perceived, differ on the basis of social and economic stratification of the people of Darjeeling, this ethnic framework resonates with every generation and bestows immense political power to the Gorkha identity making it a necessary tool in political mobilization in the fight for a separate, smaller state within the Indian union.

Fostering culture of dependency in Sikkim

Free rice, education, occasional free cows, monetary assistance given by the state and 'development' in Sikkim featured prominently in my conversations with people in Darjeeling and east Nepal. Stories of progress had reached mythical proportions and I was frequently asked if it was true that every single household in Sikkim owned more than two cars. Rapid infrastructural growth in Gangtok, strict enforcement of traffic and civic rules, success stories of organic farming and eco-tourism have contributed to this imagery and Sikkim has become a model for hill development in region. An article in India Today magazine (2009) lauded the developmental trajectory of Sikkim, it read:

'The metaphor for change in Sikkim couldn't have a more telling example than the main street, the Mahatma Gandhi Marg Road in Gangtok. Once a thoroughfare

choked with vehicles and commercial activity, it is today a splendid, tiled promenade where tourists walk around listening to channelled music...Sikkim is being helped by the Government of Singapore on town development and a Swiss University on rural projects. Singapore's urban nuances and Switzerland's rustic impetus- *these form the core of Sikkim's vision*' (emphasis mine).

This excerpt not only reflects the truth of the developmental thrust in Sikkim but is also representative of how infrastructural growth in Gangtok and its conversion into a hybrid between Singapore and Switzerland obstructs a critical engagement with the socio-political situation of the state. This description of Sikkim (or rather Gangtok) shields the fact that in Sikkim more than 19.33 percent of the population live below the poverty line⁵⁹ and 40.91 percent of the population have a monthly income of less than Rs. 5000 (State Socio Economic Census [SSEC], 2006: 18, 20).⁶⁰ Given that poverty in Sikkim is highly regionalised (highest in the western district followed by north, south and finally east)⁶¹ it is experienced most acutely amongst the rural poor living outside of Gangtok and its periphery.

On travelling just thirty minutes out of Gangtok in any direction, one is presented with a stark contrast to the picture of 'development' as imagined by people from other parts of the region. It is undeniable that the state has made some effort into providing goods and services to the people, especially in comparison to Darjeeling and east Nepal. There are schools, hospitals, roads and all other signifiers of 'development' but there is no assessment of the quality of these services provided reducing them to mere tokens of purported progress. Outside Gangtok, it is common practice for government teachers to teach in Nepali despite English being the medium of instruction; medical patients are often rushed to hospitals in Siliguri in West Bengal as the local hospital is ill-equipped to handle medical emergencies and in many parts of Sikkim people still have to walk more than two kilometres every day to collect water from springs and streams.

Poverty, underdevelopment and related issues about uniform, well-rounded development are concerns common to the entire region. However in Sikkim, it is not the politics of discrimination but that of dependency that fuels ethnic politics. People are encouraged, directly or indirectly, by the state to participate in it in order to partake in the distribution of public goods. This is in marked distinction to Darjeeling and east Nepal where ethnic activism and politics has had a rather organic origin.

Like in east Nepal and Darjeeling, the onus of development in Sikkim rests on the state, which in turn depends on the central government for assistance. Sikkim has a population of 6,10,577 (2011 Census) but in contrast to other north-eastern states with bigger territories and higher population, receives one of the largest shares of the central Annual Plan (Rs.1400 crores for 2011-2012).⁶² The 2014-15 Report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General of Sikkim states that only 22.77 percent of the revenue receipts come from the state's own resources (comprising taxes as well as non-taxes) whereas the share of Central transfers (comprising the state's share in central taxes and duties and grants-in-aid) from the Government of India comprised 77.23 percent. Given the lack of substantial industries or large scale export of agricultural goods, Sikkim's economy is driven by the secondary sector contributing over forty-three percent to the total Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP),⁶³ while the primary sector contributes around thirteen percent. This highlights the scalar nature of economic dependency of the people on the state and that of the state on the central government, making the Sikkimese economy fragile and susceptible to the vagaries of the central government.

According to the SSEC(2006:183) a large section of the population- 16.80 percent- are dependent on cultivation as a means of livelihood.⁶⁴ Of the total 211, 211 workers in the state, 46.26 per cent are farmers. Although the agricultural sector has seen a rise in the total food grain production, since 2000-01 a large proportion of the production of major crops has either fallen or stagnated owing to the lower productivity of the soil as well as the diversification of land use from subsistence to commercial agriculture, horticulture etc. (Chakrabarti, 2010: 24; Khawas, 2010: 161).

INSERT PICTURE 3

Madhesh ko chahcha's shop in Soreng, West Sikkim

Photo: Mona Chettri, 2010

Decline in agricultural growth (both subsistence and commercial) has taken a toll on rural livelihoods as well as the quality of rural life. Reminiscing about a time when pork was Rs.7/kg, Yogesh Rai of Chumbung, west Sikkim⁶⁵ joked that his children refuse to believe his stories of agricultural sufficiency and the low cost of living, 'I tell my

children these things and they say that I am lying...We grow a little bit of ginger and oranges but if the businessmen, shopkeepers from the plains of Siliguri do not send us food, we might face starvation.' His eighty year old father who had been silent for the major part of the conversation, nodded in agreement and said that it was by some magic that their lives were going on. Severe decline in maize and ginger cultivation had affected the rural economy of Chumbung, leaving many in dire straits, if not completely impoverished.

This vacuum of agricultural products has been filled by the importation of food grains and vegetables from Siliguri. These products were brought in bulk by wholesalers and sold at a low price which posed as competition to local produce (especially fruits and vegetables). In the face of decreased production, commercial competition and low returns, there is very little incentive for farmers, especially the younger generation, to continue with agriculture. In order to ensure basic sustenance, the state maintains an extensive system of public distribution which is especially targeted towards people belonging to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category. Under the Targeted PDS introduced in 1997, the government aims to provide rice at a highly subsidised rate to BPL families-providing thirty-five kgs of rice at Rs. 2 per kilo every month.⁶⁶ Under the same scheme over ten thousand beneficiaries receive thirty-five kgs of rice free of cost (Chakrabarti, 2010:24).

Contrasting this situation of agricultural decline was another village in west Sikkim where people are slowly reverting to commercial cultivation of cardamom. Kamal Subba,⁶⁷ worked as a clerk in Gangtok and owned vast ancestral land in Hee Gaon on which he had recently started to grow cardamom. On our way to a local *manghim* (Limboo temple), he pointed towards entire hills slopes covered with cardamom plants and talked about the prosperity that cardamom had brought to the village. This in turn had encouraged further diversification of land from subsistence paddy cultivation to commercial cardamom cultivation. Income from cardamom may not be sufficient to support families all year round but because its sale, along with that of ginger, generated steady and dependable income and many families had started diversifying their land use. This created additional dependency on the state and its network of suppliers and distributors for basic necessities along with the provision of education, health, education etc.

Sarkarle palkayo, 'the government has made them dependent', a phrase which is heard often in rural Sikkim might actually have some element of truth in it. Dependency

on the state has gone beyond food grains and provision of social welfare to free receipt of a variety of benefits. In the village of Singling in west Sikkim, Hangsu Bahadur, a fifth generation Tamang agriculturist was very forthcoming when asked about the benefits that he had received from the state. He told me that he had received corrugated sheets, LPG, pigs and the government had even built a toilet for him. In rural Sikkim, there were many like Hangsa Bahadur who had been receiving various benefits under different schemes. For example, as a part of a government policy, in 2011 the State Animal Husbandry Department distributed seventy-five cross-breed milch cows to tribal farmers of a constituency in North Sikkim.⁶⁸ This distribution of cows, hens and corrugated sheets is a yearly event that is most explicitly evinced during the *Janta Mela* (People's Fair) which is conducted under the auspices of the Rural Management and Development Department where beneficiaries are selected by the Department who are then eligible to receive free gifts ranging from induction stoves to financial aid for constructing homes.

The Sikkimese state is able to provide these benefits which are bequeathed to it (or at least the funds for it) by the central government as a result of its strategic location sharing international borders with three different countries. Despite breeding dependency and unequal development, distributing tangible benefits amongst the public may not always be wholly detrimental. However, it is the lack of uniformity in distribution and access to these public goods that creates a sense of relative deprivation amongst people living in certain areas, which in turn fuels the need to seek out other avenues of engagement with the state. For instance, Binita Subba, a widow and an agriculturist in Singling, west Sikkim told me of the lack of governmental assistance in the village. She lamented the fact that despite working hard in her fields, she was not always possible to support her family. According to Binita, during elections the ruling political party distributed pigs and cows, it was only the 'smart' and those associated with the Party's women's wing who received them. People like Binita who did not participate in election rallies, attend meetings regularly or did not have anyone to lobby for them did not receive anything. Corroborating the importance of political affiliation, Phul Maya Tamang of the same village recounted how it was only after her participation at the pre-election rallies that she was provided with some corrugated tin sheets by local officials. Distribution of public goods follows a long chain of bureaucratic hierarchy as everything is routed through the

local Panchayat, making it pertinent to stay informed about the benefits and more importantly to maintain ‘connections’ with the members of the local elected bodies. Distribution of pigs and *bikas* (which literally translates to development but is the colloquial term for the various benefits under the BPL scheme) were recurrent themes and a common denominator connecting all those who lived on margin of the developmental state. Access to these benefits were also seen as dependent on the right type of political affiliation, participation during election campaigns and complete electoral support.

A generous welfare scheme exists in Sikkim but access to it is dependent upon many factors of which political affiliation and electoral loyalty is an extremely important one. The welfare system is marred by the existence of personal re-distribution of public goods by elected members who control re-distribution through various central and state government schemes. This system of re-distribution is further strengthened by institutional structures like the Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) where more often than not, Panchayat elections are won by representatives of the dominant parties thereby making party patronage extremely important in the receipt of public goods.

In theory, the PRI is the most organic form of democracy but as reported in the Report on Village Development Action Plan for Sikkim (2009)⁶⁹ its efficient functioning is hampered by problems accruing from the extending of personal favours the channelling of funding to projects that were not on the list and lack of respect towards the decision of the Gram Sabha. Chettri (2008) discusses how the Gram Panchayats were usually participants only at the implementation level and had no say in the formulation of the schemes and were further confronted by public apathy. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the Gram Panchayats are solely dependent on the state government for all their projects.

The Panchayats form an important link in the distribution chain, one which is controlled by the bureaucrats, who they themselves have no room to manoeuvre in the face of political pressure. Although based on the notion of decentralized bureaucracy, the distribution pattern is highly politicised because it is the political representative, either the MLA or the member of the Panchayat, who is finally responsible for the re-distribution of goods and services which is then used as a tool to maintain allegiance to the party.

Therefore the existing welfare system fosters dependency and complete access to it is determined by political affiliation.

Apart from increasing rural poverty and relative deprivation, both rural and urban areas of Sikkim suffer from severe unemployment, which is endemic across the entire region. This situation is compounded by the problem of the educated unemployed. Awarded the 'Best in Primary Education among small states' by a leading national magazine India Today in 2010, Sikkim has a high literacy rate (82.20 percent, Census 2011)⁷⁰ and approximately twenty percent of the Annual Budget is dedicated to education. In a situation similar to that in Darjeeling, Sikkim is thus inundated with well qualified unemployed or underemployed young people who are represented by the All Sikkim Educated Self-Employed and Unemployed Association. Although the major aim of this association is to articulate the grievances of the unemployed, in recent time it has also been at the forefront of 'safeguarding the interest of the Sikkimese youth' whose socio-economic rights it claims are being threatened by outsiders.⁷¹ The coming of hydro-electric projects and pharmaceutical companies has opened up employment avenues which have made 'insider-outsider', 'sons of the soil' arguments more widespread and frequent.

Unemployment is also aggravated by the popular desire to be employed in the public sector which only employs 5.09 percent of the total working population (SSEC, 2006:183). Employment in the public sector is considered as the ultimate form of economic security and advertisements for even a few government positions can attract hundreds of applicants. This trend is aggravated by a stagnant agricultural sector combined with a steadily declining industrial sector which has severely limited employment opportunities outside the government. Sikkim, Mizoram and Nagaland may have per capita income higher than other north-eastern states but much of the income generated in these states is from public administration (18.5 per cent in Sikkim compared to the national average of 6.3 percent). This illustrates the overwhelming dependency of the population on the government for generating income and lack of productive economic activity in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. This is a point which was also emphasised by the Chief Minister at the launch of the 'Mission- Poverty Free Sikkim 2013'- 'There is no dearth of employment opportunities in the state since a lot of people from outside the

state earn their livelihoods by working here. The main cause for the so-called unemployment is the youth's total dependence on government jobs only for their bread and butter instead of having respect for dignity of labour and opting for self-employment.'⁷²

Public administration has by default become the propelling force behind economic growth which is not sustainable over an extended period of time. Despite these socio-economic issues, a strong sense of trust in the government prevailed amongst the people I met in the villages of Sikkim. As Yogesh Rai, an agriculturist said, 'the government has been throwing various schemes like a ball but our brothers and sisters have to be able to catch it.' However, one cannot usually catch this metaphoric ball without possessing political connections and/or money. The exception being if one belongs to the socio-economic categories of ST, SC and OBC. Unlike in east Nepal and Darjeeling, ethnic identity is not used as a platform to contest the state in Sikkim but it is utilised to partake in the politics of re-distribution which is patronized by the state.

In Sikkim, it is the state that has constructed and encouraged the ethnic perspective through its reservation policies. Here, the 'marginalized, backward groups' discourse is used by the state in its redistribution of goods and services and eventually to retain its popularity with the electorate. Different ethnic categories determine the degree and type of benefits that an ethnic group or an individual is entitled to.

INSERT TABLE 3

Socio-economic categories and reservation policy applicable in Sikkim

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

As ethnic groups came to be divided into different socio-economic categories, and the creation of reliable vote banks was simplified, it became relatively easy to control the benefits received by a particular ethnic group. These benefits also extend to the employment sector where there are reservations as well as age and marks relaxation for certain socio-economic categories where the maximum benefits are given to those belonging to the Scheduled Tribes.⁷³ Belonging to ST category is not an automatic guarantee of employment or other benefits but it definitely improves the chances of accessing public goods. Therefore socio-economic incentives are embedded within these

categories, making them at once attractive to the electorate and hence an important basis for the formation of a strong political base.

In this context of restricted access to public goods, ethnic identity plays an important role in creating newer channels of engagement with the state. Ethnic politics fulfils the cultural vacuum experienced by different ethnic groups and also creates an alternate mode of negotiation which dispenses with the need to follow the well-trodden path of party politics. Ethnic politics is not regarded as a threat to the existing political status quo and is even cultivated by the state through its expansive affirmative action policies which enables a wide spectrum of people to participate in the politics of re-distribution without incurring the wrath of the state. Thus in a system which favours either the rich or the politically connected, it is ethnicity that has become one of the essential means to ensure the socio-economic aspirations of the common man and woman, to whom the benefits of the welfare state does not trickle down.

With the entrenchment of affirmative action, the connection between ethnic identity and politics is cemented. This relationship represents a new form of patronage system where the state acts as the primary patron and ethnic groups, who are beneficiaries of affirmative action, are the clients. Thus, in contrast to Nepal and Darjeeling, it is this overarching incentive structure as promoted by the state that has given ethnic politics in Sikkim its distinctive form. Government employment plays an important role in the growth of ethnic competition since the state as the distributor of collective services and rewards, has the means to reward those who collaborate with it and create new support by distributing opportunities unevenly (Brass, 1991:33), a condition which has now been internalised and institutionalised in the politics of all of South Asia.

Conclusion

Problems pertaining to economic, human resource and infrastructural development of the region, social welfare and cultural preservation have a real and sustained impact on the life and culture of the eastern Himalaya. Interpretations of these issues are dependent on ethnic frameworks that have some degree of resonance with the local population and therefore can be utilised by political agents. Whether it be Sikkim, Darjeeling or east

Nepal, it is not simply the state that is perceived as accountable for the lack of 'development' but it is the ethnic nature of the state that has held back the social, economic and political progress of different groups. Therefore the challenge is not to demolish or over-throw the existing state apparatus but to ensure better avenues of negotiation with the state. Ethnic interpretation of socio-economic grievances has the power to change public mood and galvanize political action thereby making ethnic identity an important asset in the enactment of real *politik* and making political agents out of ordinary people.

Chapter 3: Ethnic identity as political identity

“These days instead of Nepali, they call us Morcha people, irrespective of whether you are in the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha or not’. Bikram Khadga and I laughed over this stereotype of the Nepalis in the Duars of West Bengal but his statement was indicative of the strong perception amongst most people of ethnic identity being synonymous with a particular political identity. Ethnic identity is an unavoidable aspect of everyday social and political interactions for the Nepalis in the Duars and one which affects their lives and livelihoods. Every single time the demand for Gorkhaland flares up in the hills, the Nepalis in the Duars have to prepare for socio-political hostility and even violence that they might be recipients of.

Despite these concerns, there is a strong conflation between ethnic and political identities in both the hills and Duars of West Bengal. However it is only a particular form of ethnic identity which has come to acquire political legitimacy and it is against this established parameter of political validity that ethnicity is moulded and presented by political agents in a form that is intelligible to ethnic members and the state.

The question at the heart of this chapter is not why political actors take the ethnic approach but rather what are the factors that make them choose a particular ethnic identity over others. The obvious reasons would be the political potential and versatility of a certain identity over others but the social-history of the people, the accepted

'repertoire of contention' and institutions also determine the decision, maybe subconsciously, to make a certain identity politically meaningful. Given that socio-economic grievances and political marginalization has been experienced by numerous generations of Nepalis living in the eastern Himalaya, it becomes imperative to analyse the factors that have facilitated ethnic politics at this particular juncture of social-history of the eastern Himalaya. While grievances or aspirations are necessary, they are not sufficient for the formation of identities and their eventual political mobilization. What is important in political mobilization is the framing of individual and isolated grievances in a way which appeals to those experiencing them and at the same time is comprehensible within a larger socio-economic framework.

The above trend emphasizes both the existence of ethnic groups and their grievances as well as the role played by 'frames'- especially the nationalistic and the ethnic, which have become easily available, powerfully resonant and widely understood through the media and internet. Following Goffman (1974) 'frames' have been defined by Snow et al (1986: 464) as a 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. For example, in eastern Nepal, simple identification as a Limbu may not have any political implications but when subsumed under the category of indigenous/ethnic there is a set characteristics (for instance backward, exploited, indigenous) that is immediately accessible to the Limbu, which can then be used for a plethora of purposes. Categories therefore affect the worldview of those who have been classified as well as those who have been excluded from it.

As Fumagalli (2007: 568) points out, in order for frames to be understood and used by the people, they need to be built on familiar material. Thus, whether it be the demand for reservations in Sikkim or a separate homeland for the Limbus or the Gorkha, these issues and demands have to be contextually framed in a manner which is appropriate to and can be understood by all. Local, regional and national frames inform the nature and conduct of everyday politics. Despite the presence of the same ethnic groups in the region as well as similarity in existential issues in the three areas, a survey of regional politics displays the emphasis on different aspect of the Nepali identity which could be attributed to different

sets of administrative rules, social, political and economic institutions within a politically demarcated area.

This chapter is an interrogation of the rationale behind the politicisation of different aspects of Nepali ethnicity in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal and discusses the local, regional and even global factors that have promoted a particular form of ethnic identity as political identity.

The political resilience of the brave Gorkha

GJM captures, the recurrent themes of political propaganda that are used to rouse public sentiment and political action-

‘We are not Pakistanis, we are not Chinese, *we are Hindustani*...the media should cast our news fairly...we have given blood for this country ... when different countries have attacked this country Ashok babu (*former member of the Legislative Assembly and staunch opponent of the movement*) have you held an AK47 and gone into the battlefield? Were you even able to hold your chest out (for the bullets)? We have already given proof of that by *letting our chests shatter* into pieces in order to save this country...what is your proof?...We have been dedicating and *sacrificing our* lives for this country. The state must remember this, it must remember that we have shed blood for this country, not water (emphasis my own).⁷⁴

INSERT PICTURE 4

Khukuri for sale in a local market in Darjeeling

The transcript above focuses on three key themes- Indian identity, sacrifice and bravery- which capture the imagery and legend of the brave Gorkha rather succinctly. The brave martyr has been central to the political narrative since the inception of the Gorkhaland movement and is a metaphor so strong that it resonates with people from all sections of society or at least it has to be projected as such by political parties. The political history of Darjeeling bears witness to the repeated resurrection of the Gorkha identity as a means of negotiation primarily with the state. Since the inception of political consciousness in the hills, the image and idea of the Gorkha has been utilized by all the

political parties. Whether it be the All India Gorkha League, Gorkha National Liberation Front or even the CPM, political parties have had to orient their agenda around the attainment of Gorkhaland, using images and language commonly attached to the imaginings of the Gorkha. For decades the presence of numerous political parties and their endorsement of 'Gorkhaland for Gorkhas' has contributed to the internalisation of this political agenda and has also established the ethnic approach as the best way to negotiate for a separate state. The ubiquity and political longevity of this identity therefore raises two obvious questions-what are the structures that facilitate this and what is the process by which this is achieved.

The romantic imagery of lush tea gardens and beautiful mountains shrouds Darjeeling's history as a colonial plantation land where people suffered the same fate of exploitation, racial discrimination and subservience as in plantations around the world. The brave Gorkha is an unexpected product of colonial imaginings and imposition of these constructions on the local populace. A product of imperialism, the construction of the Gorkha⁷⁵ can be attributed to the process of 'making up people'(Hacking, 2006:23) whereby through stereotyping, influencing perceptions etc. people and their identities are created and take a form not previously seen. This resonates in what Kishore Pradhan,⁷⁶ editor of a leading Nepali daily and a noted historian had to say about the Gorkha identity, 'we (Nepalis) are originally a peasant community but the British never knew us as agriculturists. They saw us only as fighters. Thus whatever identity was given by the British, we have adopted that as our only identification, defined ourselves by it and by calling ourselves Gorkha we are reinforcing that identity'. The theory of 'martial races' might have evolved on the battlefields of the East India Company but it has persisted and acquired political significance in Darjeeling, where the majority of supporters of the Gorkhaland movement belong to the working class in the tea gardens. It is in the plantations, another imperial legacy, where the achievements in war and recognition as *brave* have surprisingly become representative of a community which is agricultural in its occupation. The most prominent proponents of this narrative are Subhash Ghising and Bimal Gurung, leaders of the Gorkhland movement and originally from tea estates, who have been effective in evoking the brave Gorkha as the basis for a separate state.

The popularity and acceptance of this identity within the tea-estates is also linked to the widespread culture of social, economic and political subservience. The captive, uneducated labour living in isolation and in the absence of any legal protection was placed in a position of total dependence on the plantation, which fostered disempowerment and the establishment of a patron-client, mother-father (*mai-baap*) relationship with the plantation managers (Bhowmik, 1980:1525; Chatterjee, 2001: 5). There was no incentive for the substantive growth and development of local urban areas as all the provisions for the plantations came from cities like Calcutta.⁷⁷ While this was the state of affairs within the plantations, the hill elites also maintained a position of subservience in relation to the colonisers. Although a sense of cultural identity⁷⁸ was being galvanized by the educated elite, the formation of political consciousness and mobilisation was a gradual, laboured process wherein the tea estates provided an ideal environment for the propagation of democratic ideals which promised equality, agency and emancipation to the poverty stricken, disenfranchised labourers in the plantations. It was under these conditions that elections and the idea of democracy was introduced in Darjeeling, popularised through the rhetoric of the emancipation of the brave Gorkha.

Like the larger Nepali identity which was formed under the leadership of the urban, educated elite the 'Gorkha' also took shape and form in the imagination of the masses through the language and literature of the elites. Apart from their actual interaction with those who had joined the British and later Indian army, the majority of those living in the plantations, so crucial to the sustenance of this identity made no actual contribution to its construction. Other than Indra Bahadur Rai's '*Aaja Ramita Cha* (Today there is a spectacle)' published in 1961 there are no other major Nepali literary works that engage with life and society in the plantations while on the other hand those representing different aspects of colonization, the *brave* Gorkha or urban Darjeeling run into hundreds. However, despite its lack of any active contribution to the creation of the Gorkha identity, the plantation society received and embraced it completely. As this imagery of the brave, loyal, patriotic Gorkha took hold of the masses, the elites were further instrumental in giving political direction to this identity through repeated demands for the rights of the Gorkha from the British authorities.

The political as well as social mobilization of the Gorkha identity owes as much to the earlier literary elites (like Parasmani Pradhan, Agam Singh Giri) as to Subhash Ghising, the leader of the GNLF and the architect of the Gorkhaland movement of 1986. Subhash Ghising was particularly instrumental in establishing the idea of a homeland as a measure to prevent the Gorkhas from being treated as foreigners or domiciled Nepali citizens along with the powerful imagery of the brave, *khukuri* (short, machete-like knife) brandishing Gorkha (Ganguly, 2005: 478).

Democracy and concomitant political mobilisation was supposed to fulfil two functions; firstly, to change the status quo of state-society relations through the transformation of political and economic structures and secondly, to establish a separate state within the Indian union. These functions were mutually dependent on each other and an important component of democracy was the utilisation of the Gorkha identity. The Gorkha identity is a powerful evocation of a very specific history and culture of the region that has immense potential for political mobilisation, participation in electoral politics and the conversion of popular support to an electoral mandate. The success of the utilisation of Gorkha identity to this end is evident through the electoral successes of the GJM at both the local, municipal elections and the state-level elections since 2008. As T.B.Subba⁷⁹ remarks, the early pioneers of communism in Darjeeling, Ratanlan Brahmin and Ganeshlal Subba, ‘knew what would sell in Darjeeling (was) not Marxism, Leninsm but Gorkhalism’, a truism that prevails even in the contemporary context.

The utility of the Gorkha identity as a political resource, its ability to rouse political reaction and its survival over a protracted period of time necessitates the constant reproduction of images and memories of bravery and sacrifice. Musing on the Gorkha identity, one of the editors of *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation*⁸⁰ said that the imagery of the Gorkha is inscribed in the mindsets of the people from one generation to another. He pointed towards the inter-generational quality of the Gorkha identity where the same symbols, the same ‘repertoire of contention’ was performed one generation after another thereby enabling the perpetuation of this image of the Gorkha which then manifests itself politically through claims on the state.

The Gorkha identity and Gorkhaland is a project of political recognition and emancipation for the Nepalis of the Darjeeling hills which was, more often than not,

described to me in terms of people's experiences of identity crisis. This identity-crisis was also rooted in the inability to claim a stake on a certain geographical area. Most anecdotes of 'identity crisis' usually began on a train or bus journey where Indian-Nepalis were confused with Nepalese citizens or were taunted by the Bengalis as foreigners or immigrants. I asked Ringit Lepcha, a student and GJM activist, how he would describe a Gorkha to someone from south India. He responded, 'I would say that there is an ethnic group in north-east India which lives under the domination of West Bengal. That ethnic group is called the Gorkha.' This definition not only describes the Gorkha as an ethnic group but this identity is also derived from an unequal relationship of control and domination of one ethnic group by the other, thereby externalising the understanding of the Gorkha itself.

The source of this discrimination, however, was not simply economic but had a deeper root in the ambivalent socio-political status of the Indian-Nepalis whose Indian citizenship was always under suspicion owing to the open border and cultural contact with the citizens of Nepal. The Gorkha identity and Gorkhaland therefore performed a dual role of ensuring development in the hills as well as legitimizing the Gorkhas as rightful citizens of India.

While the Darjeeling hills clamour for development, this sense of identity-crisis is more pronounced in the Duars where the Nepalis are a minority community. This issue of identity crisis conflates race and nationality which is then endorsed by political parties. However, it is no wonder that for those existing in this grey space between belonging to a particular state and yet not being recognized as its citizen, the idea of Gorkhaland and as Mahesh Kumar Pradhan, a local politician from Duars put it, the label 'Made in India' was extremely important. For Nepalis living in the Duars, their insecurities were related to eviction from their lands as well as fear of cultural erosion through assimilation. As Khadga Bajay,⁸¹ an eminent retired Nepali journalist from eastern Duars, said, 'While we are expected to know fish rice (*maachar-bhaat*) which is traditionally considered a Bengali cuisine but the Bengalis do not know our traditional food like dried radish leaves (*gundruk*) or any other Nepali food. We do not need any conversions- we will all become Bengalis. I don't need just a state, I need a homeland. I want Gorkhaland.'

This demand for a homeland was being fought in various ways in different parts of India. A large number of people from Darjeeling-students, call centre workers, retail staff,

and university teachers live and work in Delhi. The viewpoints of those afar is slightly different. One of the people I met in Delhi was Kamal Tamang who taught at a university and was a prominent member of the Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh, a pan Indian organisation trying to bring the issue of Gorkhaland in the national limelight. Kamal was of the opinion that the martial discourse of the brave Gorkha made Calibans out of the Nepalis- gullible, unintelligent and ruthless. The stereotype of the brave and loyal Gorkha reinforced public imagination of the Nepalis as capable only of being guard/watchman (*bahadur*) in the Indian mainland. This hindered the credibility of the people and their demand for recognition and equality as Indian citizens.

However, for all intents and political purposes, the idea of a martial race has not only been accepted and imbibed by the Nepali community in India but has also been put to political use. The demand for Gorkhaland has thereby completed the process of reification of a colonial construct. The Gorkha is thus forever, 'a hostage to a racial discourse, a representation of the ambivalent, unequal relationship that the people of Darjeeling share with their colonial masters.'⁸²

Approaches to understanding the Gorkha range from intense internalisation (mostly amongst the tea-estate residents) to one of ambivalence amongst sections of the urban population who are more comfortable and attached to the idea of 'Darjeeling-ness' than to being Gorkhas. Although a small proportion represent this divergence from the mass attachment to Gorkhaland, their presence nonetheless reflects an important aspect of the socio-economic stratification of Darjeeling and the corresponding relationship between class and an ethnic category. Overall, however, the prevalence of attachment to the Gorkha identity highlights its efficacy as a political resource for mass mobilization in front of which all alternative forms of identity are politically impotent.

Neither Mongol nor Kirat: asserting the Limbu identity

Identity-based politics in east Nepal is also a movement against the exploitative and extractive nature of the 'centre-periphery' politics which is being experienced in the Darjeeling hills. Ethnic movements in Nepal are constructed against *Nepalization*, a process which comprised promotion by the state and intense internalization by non-Hindu

groups of the values and cultures (language, food, dress and festivals) of the Parbatiyas. This was not limited to the propagation of cultural values of the upper caste Hindu groups but extended into political and economic discrimination of non-Hindu, ethnic groups, a practice which began with the installation of the Hindu monarchy and became increasingly institutionalised with the spread of bureaucracy and a centralised administrative system. This system was further entrenched through the implantation of the caste system on the social structure of a disparate group of people in Nepal and it is this institutionalised discrimination that was sought to be remedied through the re-organization of the country on the basis of ethnic federalism. In the eastern hills these grievances against the homogenous construction and cultural domination (which also amounted to economic domination) by the state had found articulation through a movement for the reinstatement of a Limbu homeland in the area which formed the historical kingdom of Limbuwan.

The Limbus are also subsumed under a wider cultural classificatory group of the *kiratas* and have a political history of being mobilized as 'mongols' by the Mongol National Party (MNO), which was one of the earliest proponents of ethnic politics in eastern Nepal.⁸³ However, in the present context the principle totem of political mobilization and action is neither the Mongol, the Kirat nor a class-based identity but rather the ethnic Limbu identity. In stark contrast to the movement led by the MNO, today the demands of the indigenous/ethnic population have a specific target group and territory which makes it easier to focus claims and activities. The evocation of Limbu identity also facilitates the mobilization of ethnic actors in politics through examples from history of the bravado and tenacity of the Limbus against Prithvi Narayan as articulated by a new spectrum of elites who are well versed in the language of international indigenous discourse and are aware of their rights under international law. Akin to Darjeeling, this movement can be seen as a form of contention against the state which does not aim to dislodge the political or economic structures but to gain more control over them in order to influence re-distribution of public goods.

In the eastern hills of Nepal, socio-economic discrimination is perceived through an ethnic lens and political activism is directed towards the emancipation of those 'who have been left behind by the 'development process', thereby conflating issues of class and

ethnicity. Like in Darjeeling, in Nepal's eastern hills it was generally perceived that it was only in Limbuwan, a homeland for the Limbus that the rights of the Limbus could be attained and safeguarded. This movement was thus targeted specifically at the creation of Limbuwan and the protection of the prior rights (*agra-adhikar*) of the Limbus over the natural resources, political, economic and administrative extensions of the state.

Ethnic grievances against the state have always been a part of local history and discussions but until recently these issues had never received a legitimate political platform. Therefore the resurrection of the Limbu identity and its public exhortation is telling of the shift in the local and national political terrain. This shows that political re-positioning of the Limbus as a result of national political transitions and the percolation of international discussion on indigenous rights to the local level have strengthened claims of the Limbus for an ethnic homeland. Given these structural changes, the tide has turned in favour of those who have been historically repressed and marginalized on the basis of their ethnic identity.

Lack of resources is not the only factors that has led to political, social and economic inequality in eastern Nepal. The network of bureaucracy and its various social dimensions like *chakari*, *afno-manchay* and bribery are equally, if not more responsible for this situation. Feelings of being exploited, treated as second-class citizens and like a guest in their own country without the freedom to practice and preserve their culture, were feelings that were quite rampant not only amongst ethnic activists but also regular Limbu men and women that I met in the eastern hills. Although there was no uniform opinion on the prospect of an ethnic homeland there was a general cognizance of the political changes underway and the transformations that it might bring about.

For many generations now, legal diktats and state-led cultural impositions or *Nepalization* have had serious social and cultural repercussions in Nepal. For the Limbus of eastern Nepal, being a part of the Nepali nation-state, has come at the cost of their ethnic and indigenous identity. For example, *dhaan nach*⁸⁴ is an important aspect of Limbu life and culture but is a practice that is slowly changing. Performances of *dhaan nach* allow young men and women to socialise freely and while its social significance might remain unaltered, the performance itself is changing with the traditional songs (*palam*) being replaced by Nepali pop songs. It was interesting to spend time with a new generation of

Limbu teenagers who with their peroxide tinted, Korean hairstyles and a flair for Nepali hip-hop found it rather ‘embarrassing’ to speak in Limbu, especially in a multi-ethnic context. Interaction with older agriculturists⁸⁵ in Chok Magu village also reinforced the general opinion that Limbu language and culture was gradually ‘disappearing.’ The older men complained that young people did not speak the Limbu language and wore ‘international clothes’, a situation which was also sought to be remedied through a cultural revival and the political establishment of an ethnic homeland.

Shailendra Kurumba, co-ordinator of Limbu language workshop in Phidim complained that owing to the increasing popularity of English and the traditional dominance of Nepali, a large number of Limbus, especially the younger generation considered the Limbu language to be a ‘useless language’, a threat faced by regional languages across the Himalaya. Indeed, the limited applicability of Limbu language in day to day life was also acknowledged by Bairagi Kaila,⁸⁶ a noted literary figure in Nepal who blames it on the wave of Nepalese nationalism which favours Nepali over other languages and it is exactly this wave that the indigenous movement has been trying to challenge through its demands for an ethnic homeland.

While there have always been demands for a greater presence of ethnic minorities in the political and economic landscape of Nepal, the revival of Limbu identity and its assertion as a political identity was triggered by the political transition which was ushered 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, rather than the state endorsed, national identity feasible and have enabled the pursuit of economic, social and political equality.

A crucial factor in the emergence and proliferation of ethnic politics in Nepal can be attributed to the role of the Maoists (*maobadi*). The decade long Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) changed the socio-political dynamics of Nepal. The insurgency led to the Jan Andolan II in April 2006, one of the most powerful anti-establishment struggles in the history of Nepal which was headed by the Seven Party Alliance (SPA)⁸⁷ and the Unified Communist Party Nepal (Maoist) (UCPN-M) and marked the end of monarchy and the declaration of Nepal as a Democratic Republic in 2008. The Maoists also served the cause of ethnic groups by demanding a secular state, campaigning against Sanskrit

education, demanding autonomy for the indigenous peoples and openly articulating the social, political and economic inequalities that were prevalent in Nepalese society (Fisher, 2009). This brought ethnic grievances and proposals for ethnic federalism directly into the ambit of national debate, a victory for ethnic activists which had never been achieved before. While local autonomy and a federal framework had been raised as political demands by various regional groups in 1950 and again in 1990, they formed a specific program for the Maoist rebels and thus gained currency with ethnic activists.

The indigenous movement was also strengthened by the absence of a composite national agenda that did more than pay mere lip-service to various ethnic groups and considers ethnic based inequalities as a real condition that affects the lives of thousands. However, on the other hand, political instability, inefficient bureaucracy and lack of developmental benefits had led to severe political apathy in parts of rural east Nepal. On being asked, which party he voted for Maila Limbu, an agriculturist in Yangnam joked and replied, 'whoever gives me the bottle (i.e. alcohol)'. This was the least that Maila had come to expect from political parties. Although said in jest, his statement captured the residual sentiment and attitude towards the political system and governance which did not ensure neither health, education, sustenance nor security to its citizens.⁸⁸ Thus, the idea of Limbuwan, a separate state in a federal organization presented itself as an alternative and maybe an opportunity either to reclaim lost land or even just to ensure the increased presence of the state.

The socio-economic and political status of the Limbus of the eastern hill has remained unaltered for many decades and apart from the major political transition brought in by the *Maobadi*, it is the global indigenous discourse arising from Nepal's accelerated engagement with international donors and aid agencies that has gradually led to ethnic empowerment. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal has had to orient its national politics in accordance with the guidelines set out by its international donors.

Even before Jan Andolan II, international agencies like the United Nations had already made inroads into Nepalese politics. For example the celebration of the UN Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 renewed ethnic activism amongst different 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, 1995:128). Nepal became the first country in South Asia to ratify the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in 2007 recognizing over fifty-nine groups as ethnic/indigenous, which marked an important milestone for the ethnic movement in Nepal as it set new standards for governance of the *adivasi/janajati* population of Nepal. The ILO 169 (as it was popularly known) recognizes the cultural distinctiveness of ethnic/indigenous groups and is aimed at promoting full cultural rights for indigenous and tribal people who it says have been progressively marginalised and dispossessed from their sources of livelihood and rendered vulnerable to cultural shock and loss of cultural identity (Xaxa,1999).

This Convention defines self-identification as indigenous or tribal as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply with a qualification that this does not entail entitlement to the rights that may be attached to this term under international law (Bijoy et al, 2010:57). According to this Convention, qualification as an *indigenous group entails descent from the original inhabitants of a region prior to the arrival of settlers leading to poverty and political marginality, limited access to services and absence of protection from unwanted development* (Cowan et al, 2001:19, emphasis mine). However, in spite of its origins in conditions which were different to those of Nepal and the ideological contestations surrounding its applicability in the post-colonial states of Asia and Africa, Nepal's ethnic groups and their representative associations have accepted the global indigenous discourse whole-heartedly as it finally provides them with a platform through which they can engage in productive negotiation with the state for the re-distribution of resources.

Thus, the presence of international humanitarian agencies has led to greater awareness of ethnic/indigenous rights amongst ethnic elites, which 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. The impact of this international indigenous discourse on the articulation of ethnic grievances was evident in a speech given by Bhardoj Gurung,⁸⁹ executive member of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) at the World Indigenous Day celebrations in Ilam in 2010. In a passionate speech he reminded a hall full of indigenous/ethnic peoples of the economic discrimination and cultural

suppression by the migrant Hindus who not only robbed them of their lands but also their indigenous identity. He insisted that state re-construction had to be all inclusive, by which he meant that only a Gurung had the right to represent a Gurung, the Limbus had to be represented by someone from their community and so forth. In an interview with me earlier that day, Bhardoj Gurung had presented the same argument and exhorted that the demands of the indigenous be fulfilled according to ILO 169. I travelled to Kathmandu a few weeks later and it was the same demand for ‘water, forest, land’ (*jal, jungle and zamin*) in accordance to ILO 169 that was being evoked by all ethnic leaders and elites who, in unambiguous terms, posited a direct link between ethnicity and regional political-economy. Answers to my questions of ‘why an ethnic homeland?’ were turning into a repetitive rhetoric which claimed that it was only by using ethnic identity and related arguments of historic state-led discrimination could they resolve all their problems, even those related to culture.

Ethnic politics in the eastern hills can be deemed to be a product of the collision of a static, ethnically biased bureaucracy and the larger, international discourses on the ‘Rights of the Indigenous’⁹⁰ during a crucial moment in the political history of Nepal. These developments have had a serious impact on the framing of grievances, reconstruction of the Limbu identity as well as the re-positioning of the Limbu ethnic group in the wider matrix of local politics. 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. Thus, when the political opportunity structure changed in favour of indigenous/ethnic groups, their cultural identity became the most important political resource with which to demand for an ethnically inclusive Nepal.

Transitional politics and the international indigenous discourse has catapulted the Limbu ethnic identity to the status of a valuable political resource. During an interview with a diverse mix of men and women from Chok Magu, Pheden, many of the respondents admitted that being able to talk openly about their culture and religion had given them an immense sense of freedom. They said that during the Panchayat era they were not allowed to talk of their religion, had to identify as Hindus in all their official documents whilst now they could write *kirat* as their religion. Thus, it is moments of cultural freedom like these (brought about by important, structural changes in the political symmetry of the country)

that have been capitalised on by different ethnic actors to strengthen the promotion of the Limbu ethnic identity over other forms of identity as the primary political identity in their contestation for equal opportunities, rights and against the ethnic hegemony of the state.

Claiming exclusive identities in Sikkim

On 16th February 2011, *the Sukhim Yakthung Sapsok Songjumbo* (Sikkim Limboo Literary Society) made an appeal to the Census Directorate of Sikkim to give careful consideration to the correct enumeration of Limboos in Sikkim. The memorandum handed by the association to Sikkim Express, a local daily stated, ‘it has been reported to our association that some of the staff of Census filled forms themselves in some of the columns and were reluctant to write Limboo, Yooma religion⁹¹ and Limboo language for the Limboo community of Sikkim. It has to be brought to your kind notice *that we are not Nepali or Nepali citizens. We are Sikkimese Limboo strongly rooted with the land of Sikkim because we were here prior to the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty as religious king of Sikkim in 1642* (emphasis mine).’

This powerful and public assertion of Limboo identity by a leading ethnic association represents a contemporary trend in Sikkimese politics of the movement from a homogenous Nepali identity and towards a reclamation of specific ethnic identities. Always dynamic and responsive, the integration and disintegration of the Nepali identity has historically been influenced by local and regional politics. As seen in Darjeeling, east Nepal and Sikkim this ethnic category is undergoing a political re-configuration which calls for a careful analysis of the utility of ethnic identity and whether the Nepali identity had run its course, at least in Sikkim.

In the Sikkimese context, changes in public and political attitude around ethnicity forces an evaluation of the function performed by the Nepali ethnic group, which is deemed insufficient in the light of the altered economic and political environment. Given the close connection between limited resources, opportunities and affirmative action policies, a certain degree of instrumental rational is expected in this gradual shift towards the adoption of exclusive ethnic identity over the homogenous Nepali group identity. However, at the same time, it is also crucial to consider the position and portrayal of Nepalis in Sikkimese

history and the important role this can play in making the 'ethnic choice', albeit at a subconscious level.

In a linear narration of Sikkimese history, the Bhutia, Lepchas (and Limboos depending on the source of information) are the indigenous people of Sikkim. Nepalis are migrants who were brought to Sikkim by the Political Officer J.C.White and their rapid population growth was eventually responsible for the abrogation of the monarchy. This populist narration of history focuses only on key political events, overlooks the role of feudalism that plagued the kingdom and does a disservice to the communal harmony that has always prevailed in Sikkim between different ethnic groups. For instance, the indigeniety of Limboo and Magar ethnic groups to Sikkim is either obliterated from or at least not often highlighted in the history of Sikkim (Dorjee, 2012:65)⁹² nor is the political role played by Kazis and Newar elites who made a lucrative project out of settling Nepali cultivators and tenants discussed in most sources on Sikkimese history. This linear version of history also neglects the fact that the process of creating a perfect definition of what constitutes a state, citizen, indigenous and migrants is complex and controversial in a geographical area as culturally fluid as the eastern Himalaya with its long history of migration across geographical and cultural boundaries.

However, this version of history has great political potential which is used to conjure up communal solidarity on one hand, while alienating a large part of the population on the other. Legal documents like Revenue Order no.1 of 1897 still prohibit the alienation/transfer of Bhutia-Lepcha land to other communities whilst giving Bhutias access over Lepcha lands; the Sikkim Subjects Act, 1961 categorically establishes only the Lepchas, Bhutia and Limboo as the original inhabitants of Sikkim and the abolition of reservation of Nepali seats in the Legislative Assembly seats in 1978, all contribute to identity politics in Sikkim. Thus, in a political system which is still highly suspect of Nepalsi, ethnic identity politics also performs the function of authenticating the 'Sikkimese identity' of various groups that are subsumed under the Nepali category. Thus, apart from providing better access to public goods and services these categories of OBC, MBC act as a safeguard against other labels like 'migrants' and outsiders' which have been used as justification for expulsion from Bhutan and different parts of north-eastern India. In this situation socio-economic categories like ST, MBC or OBC provides recognition and an

alternate identity as Sikkimese and become a proof of being authentic Sikkimese especially at a time when anti-Sikkimese sentiments are high amongst 'authentic' Sikkimese youth as a result of scarce economic resources. Apart from providing better access to public goods and services, ethnic identity politics also performs the function

Therefore, the driving factors behind ethnic politics might lie in instrumental motives but transcendental benefits also play a decisive role in the decision for individuals and groups to participate in ethnic politics. The presence of the Bhutia-Lepcha community (the ethnic 'Other'), the social history of occupying a lower social position and the strength of a numerical majority have contributed to the socially constructed nature of the Nepalis in Sikkim and identity based politics in the state.

The reasons and motivations for engaging in ethnic politics are numerous. One factor might be the attempt to negate the image of Nepalis as migrants. However, it is the subscription to a certain imagery, the fulfilment of objective criteria of ethnic belonging and the emphasis on the tangible aspects of culture which reinforces the constructed and political nature of ethnic identities in Sikkim. The electoral victory of an ethnically disposed political party, the Sikkim Democratic Front, led to a change in the attitude and aspirations of the majority of the Nepalis of Sikkim. The SDF favoured socio-economic categories (OBC, 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 category. 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. Thus, political change has been one of the biggest precursors of the alteration in the internal dynamics of the Nepalis in Sikkim which has led to an identity flux meaning that the Nepalis of Sikkim are having to face the challenge of defining themselves within the state and in relation to other groups.

The identity flux amongst the Nepalis has also been brought about by internal pressures that the Nepali ethnic groups are undergoing. A Nepali monthly magazine *Chaaya* (1998:12-14) questioned the increase in the number of ethnic associations in Sikkim. In its attempt to analyse the situation which at that time was deemed alarming and even communal by the Nepalis of Sikkim, the magazine points at the dominating role of a homogenous Nepali culture.

‘the Nepali *jati* in Sikkim has made no effort to preserve and develop the language, culture and tradition of the groups which come under the Nepali group...No effort has been made to promote and preserve ethnic culture of the different communities. Thus, these ethnic groups have been forced to take the initiative and form associations. Therefore it is out of necessity that has led the deviation away from a main group and the assertion of exclusive rights.’

While the domination of Nepali language and Hindu traditions might be one of the factors that have resulted in ethnic politics, it is the policies of affirmative action and the material benefits provided by the state, which is the most important driving force in determining the political identity of the people as well as electoral outcomes.⁹³

Within the schemata of affirmative action, most of the Nepali ethnic groups belonged to the MBC (now OBC) category.⁹⁴ Although there are specific benefits attached to this category there are also problems with it- the first and the most fundamental problem with this category is that brings no added advantage to those aspiring to study or work in the public sector outside of Sikkim as they will still have to compete in the large national category of OBCs. Second, the concessions and reservations that they receive are less than those afforded to the ST category; third, the number of groups in the MBC list is far more than those in the ST list and thus, the available pool of resources has to be divided amongst a larger number of people. Given these de-merits, the most important demand that has arisen in the present context is that of being included in the ST list, which guarantees higher reservations, inside as well as outside the state.

Therefore in Sikkim, there is not just a movement to reclaim ethnic identity but also to attain a very specific identity- that of one of the Scheduled Tribes of India. In an ethnographic report commissioned by the state government and led by scholars like A.C.Sinha, T.B.Subba (2005: 80) concludes that foundations of Animism or Bonism and a super-structure of Hindu and Buddhist cultures were found in all the groups under the Kirata label. It continues,

‘They were basically worshippers of ancestors, deities related to clans, household, land, forest, river, etc through the mediums of their own shamans and with the sacrifice of flowers, crops, braveds and animals.....the essentially egalitarian, tribal communities having their own language, culture and traditions

began to be known as Nepali caste Hindus, which was certainly a desirable identity for them for the past couple of centuries in view of the higher social status it accrued, but it is not longer (sic) an enabling identity in the wake of other peoples like the Lepcha and Bhutia receiving benefit of their tribal identity in terms of jobs and other constitutional protection.’

When such high-profile reports make direct links between a certain ethnic identity and the material benefits that can be accrued from that identity, the clamour of the eleven ‘left out’ ethnic groups to be recognised as STs is easily comprehensible. The Association of Various Ethnic Communities of Sikkim has repeatedly requested the state government to recognize these groups as Scheduled Tribes.⁹⁵ However, for any ethnic group to be recognized as ST, they have to be able to prove their tribal identity through their material culture. This pre-requisite poses a problem for many ethnic groups who, historically, have not explicitly expressed, culturally or politically, their distinction from other groups with whom they have co-habited and experienced a certain degree of cultural intermixing. Most importantly, until the introduction of reservation categories, there was no material benefit to be gained from political or cultural displays of exclusivity. Thus in a situation where there are no tangible signifying items, identity must serve as its own sacred object; which then leads to the objectification of identity in order for it to fit within the framework that the state recognizes (Shneiderman, 2015:44).

Ethnic distinction and its demonstrability are, therefore, an absolute pre-requisite in order to secure increased access to public goods and services and tribal authenticity or ‘tribal-ness’ is measured against the prescribed criteria provided by the Government of India. A group can be recognized as a ST only if they can satisfy the long and generalized list of requisite cultural characteristics, which still draws heavily upon the criteria used to define STs in 1931. This criteria is still based on; ‘primitive characteristics’, ‘distinctive culture’, ‘geographical isolation’, ‘shyness of contact with the community at large’ and ‘backwardness’ (Kapila, 2008:122). Thus, from an array of cultural markers, the most prominent markers that are accepted by the state as essential for the establishment of a tribal identity are non-Hindu religious and cultural practices as well as a distinct language, script, mythology and folklore. This imagery has also filtered into the imaginations and representations of ethnic groups in Sikkim. For example, the booklet,

‘Ethnography of the Bhujel hill tribe’ provides a clear illustration of the general direction of ethnic revivalism in Sikkim:-

"The tribe consists of innocent people who are confined to themselves and hardly bother anything or anyone...Even though they have mediocre intelligence they are very humble and respectful to the elders. They are also very protective of the weak ones. They seem to be simple forest dwelling people and many of the common terms have to do with hunting, gathering and fishing. The religion and culture of these backward people are close to extinction and influences of other social groups have been encroaching on their way of life."⁹⁶

This shows that the Nepali ethnic group is constantly in the process of re-inventing itself as per its socio-economic requirements thereby highlighting its dynamic, socially constructed nature. This re-invention may be spurred on by (mostly) instrumental motives on the part of ethnic groups but has also been facilitated entirely by the state which values ethnic identity for its political value (as a reliable vote bank). Assertion of a particular form of ethnic identity is therefore only a part of the larger political process which is based on the politics of re-distribution wherein belonging to any socio-economic category other than the general Nepali category brings more political or economic benefits. This makes these categories even more controversial as the majority of the members of ethnic groups do not follow such lifestyles or religions thereby weakening their arguments about economic deprivation or backwardness as a result of cultural practices. Nonetheless, this trend amongst ethnic groups highlights an active re-construction of the cultural symbols (language, rituals) in order to fit the image of a tribe that has been created by a central government, which views tribal groups from an essentialised, parochial and archaic perspective.

Conclusion

Ethnic identity is one of the many identities groups and individuals can choose to make politically meaningful. In Sikkim, east Nepal and Darjeeling, ethnic identity is increasingly proving to be more politically relevant than other forms of identification and collective action. Interactions with people from different sections of society revealed

different motivations for participation in ethnic movements but in all the three areas culture, cultural identity and its preservation were forwarded as the primary motives for political activism despite the glaring issues of absent development and socio-economic inequalities. This illustrates the potency of culture in creating a platform of shared history, emotions and other attributes which at times are stronger than other political affiliations. Implicit within those ethnic claims are economic claims articulated through demands for homelands and reservations. Ethnic claims therefore provide a front for economic claims and state-society interaction influences which ethnic identity to make most useful.

Ethnic identity is, more often than not, created in the presence of the ethnic 'other' and in all three areas engagement with the ethnic other has been presented in an antagonistic manner. Books on Limbu history and mythology (mostly in Nepali) are an even mix between the bravery of the Limbus, treachery of the upper caste Brahmin and the eventual exploitation by the state. The Gorkha is locked in a constant battle with the state for recognition and equality while the few books written on Sikkimese history have always reiterated the migrant background of the Nepalis and their eventual takeover of the Buddhist Himalayan kingdom. In Sikkim, framing of ethnic grievances has been done mostly by ethnic associations, who in spite of the difference in their cultural practices all seek the same remedies from the state, namely their declaration as STs, more reservations and political representation. Recent ethnographic reports written by ethnic associations represent ethnic groups as having 'animistic, tribal features' 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. Thus, in all the three cases, poverty and social backwardness are framed as direct consequences of belonging to a particular ethnic group and therefore the key to economic emancipation of Nepali ethnic group lies in an approach which targets particular ethnic groups for development.

In the eastern Himalaya the general trend reflects a movement away from the idea of a culturally homogenous Nepali to the use of other socially constructed identities like the Gorkha or ethnic identities like Limbu, Rai etc which have more political potential. As illustrated in the chapter, the choice to emphasise a particular form of ethnic identity is influenced by many factors, leading to the enunciation of very specific identities as political. While ethnic politics is all pervasive in the eastern Himalaya, there is internal

variation even within that as a result of difference in the political and economic structures as well as the history of state-society relations in Sikkim, Darjeeling and eastern Nepal.

In an environment where political dissent can only be afforded by those who already hold power, the growth of ethnic politics broadens the base of representation marks a very important development for the politics and development in South Asia. It also represent a movement towards a regional form of governance and democracy that is dependent on tangible expressions of ethnicity as instruments for negotiations with the state.

Chapter 4 Manifestations of ethnic politics

The eastern Himalayan region has a rich history of culture and politics, making each an inseparable part of the other. This relationship between culture and politics is made evident through activities range from the celebration of regional or group specific festivals (usually distinct from Hindu festivals) to strategic ethnic voting. Thus, contemporary politics in the eastern Himalaya is marked by ethnic revivalism which is loaded with political meaning and intention. Apart from the celebration of cultural diversity, ethnic revivalism can also be seen as a form of contention against the dominant hegemony either of the state and/or an ethnic group (both of which tend to overlap). This is a process that is also facilitated by geographical interconnectedness, history of migration and fluidity of cultures.

The crux of ethnic politics is the maintenance of effective inter group boundaries in order to ensure the rights, privileges and grievances of that group can be distinguished and articulated as unique and specific to that group. However, migration and the lack of recorded historical data have rendered a major portion of the ethnic heritage and history of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal a modification if not entirely an ‘invention of tradition’⁹⁷ (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). However, lack of authenticity does not lower the credibility or potency of ethnicity as a political resource. Language, history, myths, dress, folk lore, therefore become subject to revivalism or revitalisation but as Horowitz (1977) rightly points out, the attempt to return to culture is not necessarily to recapture it in its pristine form as the new histories may contain large components of myth, language may contain foreign terms and alphabets (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006) and traditions may not be directly authentic. Cultural performance could be an elaborate ‘performatization of practice’ wherein an explicit form of cultural practice is publicly displayed in order to garner the attention of the state or other important institutions (Shneiderman, 2015:33). Ethnic revivalism in the eastern Himalaya is a conscious process of projection and promotion of a particular ethnic identity which is complemented by corresponding claims to public goods made within the framework of local and/or regional politics. This chapter illustrates the process whereby regional politics has become explicitly visible and has been incorporated as a part of the cultural

lives of the people of the region and the key actors who are involved in promoting particular forms of ethnic identity as political identity.

The Dress Code: looking like a Gorkha

In 2008, amidst a mix of outrage, enthusiasm and political pressure, the political diktat, popularly known as the 'Dress-Code' was enforced in Darjeeling under the directive of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. Pursuant to this new rule, it became mandatory for everybody to wear their ethnic dresses during the month long festival period of Dasain and Diwali, the busiest tourist season, the majority of whom tend to be from other parts of West Bengal. Despite the practical problems arising out of inadequate supply of *dhaka* fabric in the local markets, the dearth of specialised tailors needed to stitch the *daura-suruwal* and much to the chagrin of the poorer members of society, for whom it was an additional financial burden, the 'Dress-Code' was enforced without overt opposition or public outcry.

The Dress Code was an effective visual strategy employed by the GJM to institutionalise ethnic difference in support of its political argument regarding the cultural distinction of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling and its related demand for a separate state. The tangible representation of the Gorkha was supposed to reflect the culture and tradition of the Gorkhas of India, institutionalise visible differences from the Bengali and this process of 'othering' was aimed identifying and unifying the Gorkhas. Different ethnic groups like Lepchas and Tibetans were permitted to wear their traditional dresses but the Nepali ensemble of Dhaka patterned wrapper (*chaubandi*) and blouse (*cholo*) for women and *daura suruwal* for men were the most common and visible representations of the Gorkha endorsed by the GJM.⁹⁸

Ironically, these dresses are exactly the same as those worn in Nepal but different from stereotypical Bengali clothes and therefore considered politically potent. The Gorkhaland movement, like most ethnic movements, also utilised pre-existing identities which may be re-imagined and reintegrated in order to solidify the collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Processions in ethnic clothes and street performances were received by the public with great fervour and being a Gorkha was celebrated through

traditional dances, folk music, all conducted under the unwavering gaze of the Gorkhaland Police (GLP), a local police made up of young men trained by ex-servicemen, local police under the command of the GJM.

While some genuinely welcomed this Dress Code, moral policing by GJM Nari Morcha and the GLP, also highlighted the coercive nature of the cultural politics of the GJM as non-compliance invited beatings and public humiliations.⁹⁹ The demand for Gorkhaland was and still is primarily manoeuvred completely by a single party-the GJM thereby making their version of the Gorkha the only identity available and visible in the public domain.

This move highlights two important themes touched upon the Chapter 4, the first being that the image of the Gorkha is constructed in opposition the culture and imagery of the dominant Bengali ethnic group. The Gorkha identity is a rejection of the Gorkha's portrayal as mercenaries and immigrants in popular discourse and most specifically in the vitriolic attacks by the anti- Gorkhaland agitators like the *Bangla O Bangla Bhasha Bachao Committee* (Save the Bengali Bhasha Committee)¹⁰⁰ which are social organizations with a political agenda. and second, that a political party had now resorted to issuing cultural commands in a bid to further its political agenda thereby placing ethnic identity and its tangible expressions in the centre of the demand for a separate state.

Apart from displaying Gorkha culture to the tourists, the Dress Code was also supposed to promote a sense of ethnic bond that could be instrumental in furthering the homeland movement. The cultural propaganda might have succeeded in achieving that but it also made people more cognizant of ethnic difference between the people of the Darjeeling hills. Binayak Sundas, one of the hundreds of Darjeeling residents who had to follow the GJM directions, recalled how the tangible expression of cultural difference challenged his imagery of the Gorkha as a *khukuri* brandishing, *daura-suruwal* wearing Hindu man, an unexpected outcome shared by many of those living in the hills.

Although ethnic revivalism amongst different Nepali ethnic groups had not gathered momentum as it has had under the Mamta Banerjee regime (2011-incumbent), this visibility of 'otherness' even within the Gorkha ethnic category raised concerns amongst the rank and file of the GJM. Sunil Rai, Central Committee member of the GJM, had an interesting explanation for the culture of the Gorkha. While previously the term was

directly representative of the Nepalis living in Darjeeling most specifically and of the Nepalis living in India more generally, the boundaries of the term ‘Gorkha’ had now widened. According to him, it has now incorporated members of other ethnic groups like Tibetans and Lepchas living in the Darjeeling hills, who do not share any similarity, historical or cultural with the ethnic groups usually included in the ‘Gorkha’ category. This widening of the Gorkha category arises out of the political necessity for those living in the Darjeeling hills to present a united front to the West Bengal government. According to this new definition, everyone- Biharis, Marwaris, Tibetans- was a Gorkha irrespective of their socio-political history or connection to region. The response to the challenge from within was to make the idea of Gorkha more inclusive in order to bring the largest cross-section of people within its fold whilst retaining *dhaka sari*, *daura suruwal* and *khukuri* and images of soldiers and martyrs as the dominant imagery related to the Gorkha in the public sphere.

This ambivalent politics points towards the constructed nature of the Gorkha identity, whose symbols, membership and cultural content were prone to manipulation by political parties in response to changes in the wider political landscape.

INSERT PICTURE 5

On 21 May, 2010, Madan Tamang, leader of All India Gorkha League was assassinated in the middle of Darjeeling town. His assassin had attacked him with a *khukuri*, a carved machete like knife commonly associated with the faithful, fearless Gorkhas. Political polemics and conspiracy theories followed but the symbolic significance of the act is probably as important as the political. Not only was the assassination a drastic representation of the stereotype attached with the brave Gorkha but also of the internalisation and reproduction of this identity in the everyday life politics of the Darjeeling hills. Symbolic enactment of this identity takes place on a daily basis, for example through miniature *khukuri* which are worn as brooches by men or on the Nepali cap (*topi*), through the insignia of the local police, political parties and in the form of graffiti on public spaces.

Probably the most effective symbolic enactment of the identity, however, is through popular culture. Local rock band *Mantra* attained fame with songs like ‘brave Gorkhali’ which celebrates the identification of the self as Gorkha, while the song, ‘Nepali ho’ (we are Nepali) by the Kathmandu based band 1974 A.D which celebrates the military achievements of the Nepali *jat* became an anthem in the hills. This underlines how the Gorkha and its imaginations have become a part of the collective psyche and is the omnipresent sub-text of any political activity.

The answer to who or what the Gorkha is can be different, depending on the epistemological background of the question asked. The answer also varies according to the reference point and in the contemporary context, the emphasis is not on what the Gorkha is but on what it is not. Thus, the Gorkha is not a Bengali or a citizen of Nepal but is a construction which calls, ironically, for the acceptance of a term which is associated with Nepal. Owing to this unequal relationship, the imagery and concomitant identity which was given by the colonizers has never been challenged but rather imbibed and strengthened. More than seventy percent of the labour force of Darjeeling District works on tea plantations, of which more than half of the workers are women and it is the images of tea and/or women working on the plantations that has come to be the visual representation of Darjeeling the world over.

However, within the ambit of local politics, it is the image of the *brave* Gorkha with well defined ethnic traits that is persistent in public imagination and used for political mobilisation. Despite being at odds with the social and economic reality of Darjeeling, economic underdevelopment and political disempowerment is voiced through the assertion of ethnic identity rather than class. Thus when popular politics necessitates the mobilisation of numbers and the political strength of any party is determined by its clout in the tea-estates, thereby making the tea-estates key sites of political contestation and rhetoric which reinforces ‘fossilised identities’ like that of the Gorkha (Golay, 2006).

Thus, the donning of traditional clothes, performance of traditional dances and the cultural processions performed two parallel functions- ethnic distinction from the majority Bengali as well as portrayal of unyielding patriotism towards the Indian state. The Gorkhaland movement captures the essence of what Laswell (1927) defines as the functions of a cultural propaganda, which is the presentation of a culture in a manner that

generates favour, converts the hostile, attracts the indifferent and prevents negative assumption. In effect, the cultural propaganda was an attempt to increase the value of the Gorkha as a valid ethnic resource capable of bringing changes in the lives of the Nepalis of Darjeeling. The present day Gorkha unity and identity is a product not only of the collective memory of home and migration but also of the internalisation of the colonial construct of the Gorkha, a word which outside the Darjeeling hills is usually synonymous with gatekeepers or watchmen. Valor, sacrifice and death for Mother India is celebrated and contributes to the display of patriotism and loyalty towards the Indian state¹⁰¹ in a bid to replace the stereotypical image of the community as mercenaries, immigrants and gatekeepers which is sought to be resolved through the explicit display of the unique culture of the Gorkhas.

Becoming a tribe in Sikkim

'We did not celebrate the Rai festival *Sakewa* before; it is only after the present government came into power that we have started celebrating it. In this the Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh (AKRS/United Kirat Rai Association) has played an important role as they have increased the public awareness (*jan chetna*) amongst the Rai community and has been successful in making *Sakewa* not a cultural festival but also as an exhibition of our community (*jatiyeta*) and thereby bringing all our people together.'

The excerpt from a conversation with Rajesh Rai, a retired teacher in west Sikkim, highlights very clearly the key components of ethnic politics in Sikkim-state, communities and ethnic associations.

The politics of identity is manifested primarily through the proliferation of ethnic associations who are engaged in the discovery/re-construction of exclusive cultural symbols that fit neatly within a parochial and essentialised national discourse on tribals. The state as a political agent has led to the creation of a social framework which is more conscious and receptive to ethnicity and its cultural markers than it has ever been before. The state in Sikkim has become the 'consumer of otherness' (Shneiderman, 2015:54) and

ethnic associations are the primary channels through which this ‘otherness’ is conveyed to the state and the people. As a consequence this has diffused political agency among different ethnic associations which implement governmental policies but probably more importantly formulate their agenda within the guidelines given by the state and use this in order to negotiate with it.

Unlike in Darjeeling, ethnic politics in Sikkim is steered by ethnic associations which function in tandem with the state and do not have to negotiate with it for recognition or socio-political space. Instead, it is a request a share of the privileges provided to groups with similar cultural features. Most ethnic associations in Sikkim are headed by a minority of ethnic elites who are relatively more adept at orientating the Gangtok bureaucracy than the majority of their ethnic members and are knowledgeable in how to secure maximum state benefit for a particular group. Lack of facilities like office space and community halls do not pose any major impediment to the functioning of the associations but without the financial and institutional support of the state, crucial projects like language and script development and cultural exhibitions within and outside the state are not possible.

After talking to Rajesh Rai, a about his new religion ‘Lovism’ and worship of the Supreme Master God Angel¹⁰² I asked if he owned a Rai dress or had seen one The tangible markers of Rai ethnicity were not in conflict with his new religion and he wholeheartedly supported the initiative of the AKRS in the revival of the Rai dress which he had seen on display at the Namchi Mahautsav which is a state sponsored cultural extravaganza held at Namchi in South Sikkim. This event is held across three days with the aim of showcasing the ethnic diversity of Sikkim (or at least the material aspects of it) and plays a very important role in re-introducing specific, tangible aspects of ethnic culture to the common man and tourists alike. Along with Namchi Mahautsav, there are other cultural festivals organised by ethnic associations themselves where there are public performances of ethnic culture which on one hand has a direct political purpose of establishing exclusive, tribal credentials and on the works towards the essentialisation of culture, which then get re-produced in the public domain (Snheiderman, 2015:56).

Hangsa Bahadur Tamang who had earlier told me of the pigs and toilets that he had received from the state beamed with pride as he showed me his Tamang *topi* (hat). He was appreciative of the changes around him and was happy to see the move away from simple *daura-suruwal* to Tamang ethnic clothes that had been introduced by the Tamang association, despite not being in a position to afford it. By introducing ethnic dresses, language and the renewal of ethnic festivals, ethnic associations were therefore in a prime position to manoeuvre the trajectory of cultural development of ethnic groups which in turn exemplified the control exerted by ethnic associations over politically legitimate markers of ethnicity.

Thus the experience of Rai-ness or Limboo-ness and the understanding of cultural items and their significance is controlled by ethnic associations, who with their ‘grass-root/village’ connections are considered the source of cultural authenticity. Ironically, these very ‘grass-root/village’ connections are reduced to mere recipients of the decisions taken by the ethnic associations which are based in urban areas.

INSERT PICTURE 6

The Limboo script on display at the Namchi Mahautsav, Sikkim

Photo: Mona Chettri, 2010

Ethnic associations play an important role in the choice and development of one cultural aspect over another (see Shneiderman, 2015). Language and script are essential for cultural preservation and, as indicated in Chapter 4, they are also important for recognition as a ST and therefore access to the benefits from the state.¹⁰³ Therefore the development of language and script was high on the priority list of most ethnic associations. The Rai ethnic group has over twenty-three different dialects out of which Bantawa was chosen as the official language by the AKRS in 1996 and a Bantawa script was developed by 1998.¹⁰⁴ In another instance, on 18 July, 2012 the Sikkim Tamang Buddhist Association organised an International Tamang language and literature seminar where the members of the association refused the addition of new words from Tibetan grammar in the *Tamyang* (Tamang dialect) but on the other hand, a total of 490 new

Tamang words were listed that came up in the process of text book writing (Sikkim Express, 2012).¹⁰⁵

Most ethnic associations usually originated as voluntary schools in rented rooms and while some continue in the same vein, lack of infrastructure and governmental assistance has not impeded their pioneering work on ethnic language development. Ravi Rai conducted language classes in his house and explained that the motivation for his students ranged from genuine interest in learning the language to considering it an aid to future employment as ethnic language teachers in government schools and colleges across the state where Lepcha, Rai and Limboo languages are taught at different levels. This utilitarian perspective towards ethnic languages was also reflected in a small survey that I conducted at a high school in west Sikkim where most respondents said that they spoke their respective ethnic languages at home, preferred English over all other languages and thought that apart from English, their ethnic languages would be most useful in the future, thereby eclipsing the popularity and utility of Nepali language. The data is thus a small example of a positive shift in the way ethnicity is viewed which can be attributed to governmental policies like the introduction of regional languages, cultural events and the support which it lends to ethnic associations who work with their respective communities.

Despite the diversity in the motives of the students who are learning the language or the government and ethnic associations that are promoting ethnic languages, the trend of teaching and learning ethnic language is gaining popularity. Thus, apart from reservations, ethnicity can also enhance the life chances of individuals by promoting alternative forms of employment thereby raising its value as a resource amongst people.

Festivals provide another excellent avenue through which to display cultural exclusivity and distinction as tribes who practice non-Hindu rituals, myths of origin (mostly disseminated through booklets produced by ethnic associations) and distinct ethnic clothing. There is a gradual movement away from the celebration of *dasai* and the declaration of ethnic festivals as state holidays is now considered as a sign of a group's importance and prestige. This has led to the celebration of different festivals and the (re)discovery of new ones. For instance, apart from national holidays declared by the Central Government and other pre-existent state holidays like Dasain, Diwali and Losar

(Tibetan New Year), Losoong (Sikkimese New Year) Sikkim's list of holidays now includes new festivals like the Newar festival of *Indrajatra*, Limbu festival of *Teyongsi Sirijunga Sawan Tongnam*, the Magar festival of *Barahimizong* and *Tamu Lochar*, the festival of the Tamang ethnic group (Source: Almanac of Sikkim published by Sikkim Government, 2013). These festivals made their appearance on the state almanac gradually after the Limboo and Tamang communities were declared as OBC in 1994 and have come to populate state almanac with every corresponding ethnic claim.

While ethnic revivalism might fill in the cultural vacuum experienced by a large number of people, the role of the state is well recognized and lauded by even those who have not received any tangible benefits as such. The ongoing cultural revivalism in Sikkim functions on two, seemingly inter-related levels. While on one level it may serve the purpose of securing reservations and benefits for the ethnic elites, on another level and for the majority of those living in rural areas, unable to access the benefits of affirmative, it fulfils the cultural vacuum created by a domineering, homogenous Nepali identity which stifled other sub-ethnic identities. Thus, for people like Shyam Limboo, a carpenter in Hee Gaon, west Sikkim, who recounted stories of his walks to other parts of the hills just to perform the traditional Limboo dance (*dhan nach*), its revival albeit performed on stage is still a welcome alternative to the prospect of it becoming completely extinct. In this context the cultural connection with Nepal is highly important as most ethnic groups either bring cultural performers and shamans from Nepal to show and teach ethnic members in Sikkim or the ethnic elites themselves travel to Nepal in order to establish connections with their cultural counterpart in Nepal¹⁰⁶ (see Shneiderman, 2015:128-167).

In the villages of west Sikkim inhabited by members of larger, well established groups like Limboo, Rai and Tamang, conversations with young as well as middle-aged people about specific ethnic cultures and traditions like *palam*, myths of origins drew some hesitation and long silences. Responses usually reflected an inter-mixing of cultural practices between different group, something which also resonated with my personal understanding of Himalayan society and culture. In Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalaya, cultural exchange, assimilation and integration is the norm rather the exception. Cultural practices (like shamanism, religious and harvesting ceremonies) often tended to be an amalgam of beliefs of different ethnic groups living in a particular area (more evident in

Sikkim and Darjeeling than in east Nepal). This can be attributed to the generations of inter-mixing of cultures in the hills and the erosion of culturally specific traits especially those of groups who migrated from neighbouring regions, thereby making pure, unadulterated cultural practices almost impossible to locate.

However, since the state provides a framework around which various groups have to define themselves in very specific, exclusive terms through their clothes, religion, rituals, food and kinship patterns, which has led to the revivalism and essentialisation of culture. As a process that is initiated and maneuvered by ethnic elites, there is very little proliferation of information about ethnic culture among people at the grass-root level and access to the very knowledge that has, ironically been constructed with the support of shamans and cultural practitioners from villages and rural areas. While shamans and bureaucrats might not necessarily agree with each other, each usually cross over their field of power and privilege -bureaucrats and activists attend rituals and shamans attend association meetings- in a bid to create a united front to the state in their quest for the Scheduled Tribe status (also see Shneiderman 2015:65).

The Nepalis in Sikkim are in a cultural transition from a homogenous entity (earlier simply identified politically and socially as Nepalis) to a heterogeneous collective with different ethnic groups. The claims made by these groups are then put on public display in places like the *Namchi Mahatutsav*. Sikkim and the eastern Himalaya in general is witnessing what may be said to be the first generation of ethnic dress wearers. The popularity of these clothes is evinced by their increased visibility in social functions like weddings, festivals and even official events. It is, therefore, only a matter of time before ethnic clothes become commonplace and probably considered less 'exotic' than they are now. Another cultural tool that is prominent amongst stronger ethnic groups (i.e. those which are well organised, financially solvent and have a large membership) is the use of memories. The commercial reproduction (music videos, plays, YouTube videos) of folklore, past glories, religious rituals, harvest festivals were being produced as evidences of indigeneity and were freely available in the region.

The increasing receptivity of the state to ethnic identity as highlighted through its socio-economic 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 OBC categories as ST. Effective lobbying by the ethnic elites, who are usually well placed within the governmental bureaucracy, has led to the state directing two separate commissions, the Sinha Commission in 2004 and the Burman Commission in 2009 to determine the statutory status of the ethnic entities in Sikkim.

Ethnic associations have been at the forefront of framing ethnic grievances and in spite of the difference in their cultural practices all seek the same remedies from the state-declaration as STs, more reservations and political representation and ultimately a larger share of public goods. Ethnic groups in Sikkim are situated within a system that promotes economic dependency on the state. Rise in population and increasing cost of living in addition to a lack of revenue generation avenues necessitates the turn towards ethnic politics, the form and content of which is endorsed by the state and supported by the people who partake in it. Nonetheless, the revival and celebration of ethnic culture is also welcomed for its transcendental benefits especially in an increasingly 'Indian-izing' environment through the media as well as personal experiences in different parts of the country. Although the material benefits of these categories are mostly exploited by those who have money and political connections, it however does provide hope of some respite to the common man. Despite the lack of apparent material benefits, ethnic revivalism garners support and enthusiasm in the rural areas because it restores a sense of lost tradition, which is inevitably linked to individual as well as communal identity. Ethnic politics relies, to a very large extent, on the use of culture- not only as a means towards a tangible reward but also as the reward itself. In Sikkim the existence of an ethnic language and a script is vital for the official recognition of that particular group by the state. While this recognition might bring tangible rewards and benefits, the very process of revival and preservation of culture can also have equal, if not greater significance for the ethnic group which is on the verge of assimilation with the dominant group. Culture and culturally symbolic goods (like festivals, language, and cultural practices) are therefore very important.

Whether fragmentation, revival or both, the assertion of ethnic identity has had a profound effect on the social and political realm of the Sikkimese-Nepali. As different groups rise to claim their tribal status, the nuances and expression of ethnic identity will

get further refined resulting in increased institutionalization of ethnic categories as political categories.

Limbus as the embodiment of the indigenous discourse

Limbu practices of worship are based on the *Mundhum*, a collection of spiritual revelations, which are interpreted and revealed by the *Mudhumsba* and the *Fedangba* (shamans) who act as conduits for the various spirits. Religion is linked to language as the *Mundhum* is full of metaphors and a source of the classical form of Limbu language.¹⁰⁷ The *Mundhum* has not been translated entirely into Nepali or Limbu language and thus, in the eastern hills, an endangered language equates to a gradual dissipation of culture and religion. Changes in lifestyle choices, marriage practices and even cultural performances are considered as indicators of cultural erosion by people like Sukhman Limbu, an agriculturist in eastern Nepal. He lamented the fact that people did not even recognize the traditional female attire (*mekhle*) and the gradual modification of *dhan-naach* and was irked that Limbu children today did not even know the Limbu names for the parts of their body.

Cultural erosion and assimilation may be an inevitable process but preserving Limbu culture and way of life has now become a part of a larger political agenda of ethnic homelands. The importance of this political juncture has been well captured by Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC or the Chumlung, hereafter), the foremost Limbu ethnic association and one of the earliest advocates for the state of Limbuwan, at least at an organisational level. Founded in 1989 it is organised on a pyramidal framework, with Kathmandu once again at the top and are regional network expanding down to the rural areas. All Limbus are members by default and there are elected committees both at the district and the central level who act as representatives for the community in different gatherings and liaise between the authorities and community members.

As a firm proponent of ethnic homelands, the Chumlung believes that ethnic language and culture can only be preserved in a homeland¹⁰⁸ and that without political rights, there can be no cultural rights.¹⁰⁹ As its primary function the Chumlung organizes Limbu language and cultural dance classes in all the areas where it has a functional office, especially in eastern Nepal, with an aim to popularize Limbu culture amongst the younger

generation. However, its activities are not limited to conducting language classes or performing cultural dances. As the sole representative organisation of the Limbus it has also moulded its social objectives to accommodate political rights which it manifests by organising multi-party meetings, demanding cultural freedom and equality (previously its primary demand) and more recently by agitating politically as a pressure group for a Limbu state thereby highlighting the impact of political opportunities on social organisations.

The Chumlung has been at the forefront of the development of Limbu language and script (as a result of strict state control over ethnic language and culture, the script known as the Sirijonga script was developed in Sikkim by the Nepalese Limbu scholar Iman Singh Chemjong in the early 1960s where he received patronage from the Sikkimese royal family) by raising awareness about the language, conducting adult literacy classes and developing books and other reading materials in Limbu. It also publishes a monthly newsletter '*Tanchoppa*' (Rising Star) which is aimed not only at discussing and providing information about different issues facing the community but also at standardizing the Limbu language and script. The Chumlung has also played a leading role in introducing Limbu language classes into primary school education and by providing human resources to the centrally-based Curriculum Development Centre and since 1994 it has helped produce text books for classes one to five (Subba and Subba, 2003:4). In 1993 to mark World Indigenous Day, the Chumlung initiated the 'Literacy in Mother Tongue' project, a non-formal education program with the aim of promoting literacy in the Limbu language. This project was also aimed at disseminating information on topics like gender equality, drug abuse as well as human and indigenous rights, especially those related to the ILO 169 (ibid). The twin issues of language development and linguistic rights have also been taken up by the Limbu Language Development Association (LiLDA), a community based organization established in 2000 which also works towards the preservation of indigenous crafts and skills. LiLDA has published numerous books in Limbu which are used in both formal as well as non-formal education and has organized Limbu Language and Script Learning Class for speakers as well as non-speakers of the language.

As stated in Chapter 4 preservation is guided by a wider discourse on the rights of the Indigenous as enshrined in the ILO 169 which gives clear guidelines on the rights of

the indigenous people over water, land and forests. Embedded within the discourse of indigenous rights guiding the ethnic movement in Nepal, the Chumlung is a founding member of NEFIN and supports the activities of NEFIN by participating actively in the various motor vehicle strikes (*chakka-jam*), demonstrations and fire-torch processions (*raakay julus*). The Chumlung also propagates issues of rights of all the indigenous groups over resources whilst simultaneously talking about the ‘*agra-adhikar*’ or prior rights of the Limbus as the original indigenous population of Limbuwan which positions them in an awkward social relationship with the members of other communities.

INSERT PICTURE 7

Raakay-Julus: fire-torch procession in Ilam, organised by NEFIN

Photo: Mona Chettri, Ilam, 2010

Keeping with the criteria and the guideline set out by the ILO 169 the indigenous movement in Nepal defines its ethnic identity through its emphasis on non-Hindu practices and its history of socio-cultural subjugation through the state sponsored process of Nepalization of their ethnic values. For example, there was a general consensus among the older respondents that I spoke to in Yangnam village that young people were becoming more reluctant to celebrate Hindu festivals like Dasain and were increasingly trying to revive Limbu festivals like *Chasok Tongnam*. During one of the group interviews in Ilam, Maya Jabegu, an active member of the Chumlung, recounted to me and other ladies present there the Limbu version of the myth behind the celebration of Tihar which had been renamed as *Balihang Tongnam*. In this version the return of the Hindu King Rama from exile has been replaced with the story of the Kirata king Balihang’s victory over evil.¹¹⁰ Maya’s version was new not only to me but the other Limbu ladies too. Listening to her passionate narrative of *Balihang Tongnam* and the reciprocal comments of appreciation from other women who felt that they had learnt something new about their culture, it became apparent to me that the Chumlung played a very important role in the production, dissemination and use of Limbu culture and their success was dependent on the mobilisation of Limbus by committed activists like Maya and her friends who were steady in the pursuit of the goals set out by Chumlung.

Thus, one of KYC's many agendas is to sensitise people about their religious and cultural practices especially through the youth who migrate from villages to the district headquarters for education and employment. Chumlung's activities are publicized through an extensive social network amongst Limbu students and a bi-lingual local magazine called *Sema*. Change in the perception and attitudes of people is crucial in the politics of cultural revivalism. Chumlung has made commendable inroads through its extensive network in the rural areas and its investment in the production of literature and videos related to Limbu culture. Just like in the case of the Thangmi ethnic group in Nepal, the increasing exposure of practitioners to performance and vice versa, the trend of home-grown videos, small-budget documentaries etc (Shneiderman, 2015:55) had opened up discussions on the constituents of Limbu culture. Despite this opening up, cultural production was controlled and manoeuvred by the Chumlung which was considered as the ultimate authority on Limbu culture by the locals.

Chumlung is heavily invested in the movement for Limbuwan. The primary agenda of their Sixth Annual Convention in 2007 was the demand for Limbuwan and it was only after the Convention that a political party for this specific purpose was formed.¹¹¹ In Panchthar, a Limbu bastion in east Nepal, Chumlung has been upfront about its politics. One of the most tangible examples of this is the construction of the gate that welcomes visitors to the state of Limbuwan and where it is mandatory for all vehicles to have Limbuwan number plates.¹¹² The ideological rationale of their work is based on the premise that culture and its preservation is crucial in order to be able to stake political claims based on it.

Transitional politics and the international indigenous discourse has catapulted the Chumlung to a position where it can now be vocal about the political rights of the people that they represent and take concrete actions that favour the image as well as identification of the community. For example, during the last census in 2010, it was one of Chumlung's main aims to educate people on the religion that they should choose during the census. They instructed people to fill in 'Kirat' as their religion and 'Limbu' as their language as opposed to Hinduism as their religion and Nepali as their language. Despite being a community based organization, it was one of the earliest proponents of a political movement for an ethnic homeland and the re-framing of Limbus as indigenous as per the

guidelines of ILO169. Chumlung's activities have a wide ranging impact on the modes of identification of the people as it presents them with an identity, which may be parallel if not alternate to their national identity. Chumlung may not directly challenge the bureaucratic system but it works to generate interest and awareness amongst the Limbus as the indigenous people of Limbuwan. This presents an alternative political narrative (as opposed to that promoted by the state) as it positions the state as encroaching upon the rights not only of its citizens but also its indigenous people, the original people of the land, thereby immediately making the state tyrannical and its actions unjustifiable.

Political revival of ethnic identity presents itself as a chance to reclaim lost opportunities and in this the Chumlung plays a crucial role as not only does it preserve and popularize Limbu culture, it also reminds the people and the state of all that has been lost and needs to be redeemed both in terms of material (like *kipat*) as well as cultural heritage. Chumlung plays an important role in formulating a positive imagery as well as highlighting the political potential of the Limbu ethnic group, thereby making individuals make the 'ethnic choice' i.e. to choose ethnicity in its specific representation as their political identity. This is accomplished through the revival of Limbu language and culture and linking cultural erosion to discriminatory state policies, thereby framing and articulating pre-existing grievances in explicit political terms.

The Chumlung has been successful in framing the backwardness of the Limbu community as a result of state-led Hindu domination which has deprived them of all of the fruits of development. It has also succeeded in the revival of Limbu culture and tradition through its emphasis on literature development, cultural performances, vernacular newspapers and local radio. This has led to an enhanced sense of cultural identity amongst the Limbu community especially in districts like Panchthar and Taplejung which are demographically dominated by Limbus. Demands for Limbuwan and prior rights (*agra-adhikar*) are directly linked to material demands of the Limbus thereby highlighting the instrumental rational that is inherent in cultural revival as well as the potential of ethnicity as political resource. The boundaries between the social and political fields are highly blurred as ethnic activists engage and support activities that are explicitly political. Whether it be the display of clothes and culture during the celebration of World Indigenous Day or articulating simultaneously their demands for ethnic federalism and

indigenous rights reveals how cultural rights are seen as a natural component of economic and political rights and vice versa.

Conclusion

Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal can be differentiated on the basis of the symbols that are made politically relevant, their interpretations and presentation in the public domain. They can also be distinguished on account of the key political agent taking the lead in enabling these political representations of popular politics. In Sikkim and Nepal, it is ethnic associations who either with state support (Sikkim) or with the help of international organisations (Nepal) are championing the ethnic agenda and in Darjeeling it is the political party, the GJM which has been at the forefront of promoting the culture of the Gorkha. Ethnic politics can only succeed when there is a local initiative and participation supporting claims made ethnic associations or political parties and as the chapter illustrates, ethnic/political agents have been successful in gaining public support for their cause.

Apart from the explicit display of ethnic culture, the attempts to define boundaries and construction of ethnic markers the enactment of ethnic politics also highlights three important issues. Firstly, there is a slow but gradual change in the conceptual meaning of political participation and expectations from it. Participation in active politics now does not necessarily entail violent agitation but can be simply be achieved by participating in ethnic festivals which is a display of ethnic solidarity which is useful for identification as vote banks and for political mobilisation, a feature which is inherent in democratic politics.

Secondly, ethnic politics has brought to the political fore a wide spectrum of people who would have otherwise not been considered or would have liked to consider themselves as political. This has made regional politics and consequently democracy more inclusive and finally what ethnic politics also shows is that contestations against the state are conducted within state approved parameters which confirms that the aim is challenge the state in a bid to make it more fair, just and equitable. The manifestations of this

politics vary from one region to another but are united in their enactment of ethnic politics within the democratic framework. Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya has therefore led to a regional interpretation of democracy, the characteristics of which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Constructing Democracy

A persistent feature of regional politics is that political dissent or public expression of grievances can only be afforded by those who hold some sort of power or 'connections'. This is again complicated by the widespread culture of political impunity, embedded and ritualised in every power relation, practiced on the back of support lent by leading political parties. Poverty shortens an individual's time horizon and maximizes the effectiveness of short-run material inducements and incentives, material or symbolic, become formidable weapons in building coalitions and/or social engineering (Lemarchand and Legg, 1972: 158). Thus, when social, economic and political problems are combined with the galvanizing power of ethnicity, the result can only be a form of popular politics which, with its infectious rhetoric, is powerful enough to influence the prevailing status-quo.

Ethnic identity is socially constructed, subjective and loaded with connotations of ethnocentrism which can be detrimental for modern state building. If subjective criteria determines 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 spectrum of people wider than that of a kinship group. Despite this basic distinction in the eastern Himalaya, democracy (understood as adult franchise, formation of political parties and freedom of political thought and action) and ethnic politics co-exists without any apparent contradiction in a region where it has been introduced fairly recently as a replacement for monarchical, feudal or colonial systems. When democratic ideals are introduced in societies with distinct socio-political structures, democracy may be unable to challenge pre-existing political norms and traditions and may not necessarily lead to de-centralisation of power and empowerment of the local *demos*.

In the eastern Himalaya, poverty and socio-political backwardness are a legacy of the subordination of and discrimination against a particular ethnic group by the ruling strata of the society- whether it be the colonisers in Darjeeling or the Rana Prime Ministers in Nepal and it is the resultant subservient position and the elaborate networks of patronage which is being challenged by ethnic politics.

Another important factor that has prompted a wide spectrum of people to take the ethnic approach to the resolution of socio-economic problems is, ironically, the developmental thrust of the state. Realignments of the economy from either subsistence to

commercial or from agricultural to industrial or service based also have an impact on access to social, political and economic institutions which in turn affects the way different groups interact with the state and with each other. Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal are all undergoing development in terms of improved infrastructure and a rise in living standards at their own pace. Sikkim is inundated with hydro-electric projects and generous financial aid from the central government which has led to manifold increase in the standard of living, consumerism and inflation (most of the wealth, however, is concentrated in the capital town Gangtok). Darjeeling which is adjacent to Sikkim is undergoing grave socio-economic problems exhibited through the lack of investment in infrastructure or human resources, thereby encouraging a sense of relative deprivation. In Darjeeling and Sikkim pressure, responsibility and power are centralized in the state. Nepal, one of the poorest nations in the world, is emerging from a decade long insurgency (1996-2006) and the devastating earthquake of 2015 which ravaged its feeble economy and handicapped the (negligible) development efforts of the state. Although the state in Nepal is dependent on donor aid for the majority of its developmental programmes, non-state actors have not been able to eclipse the role of the state. Dependency and expectations for equitable distribution of resources, especially for non-tangible goods like reservations, equal opportunities, legal rights, national recognition cannot be ignored as they can only be ordained by the state.

However, as the scope of state-led development has increased, the ability of the average citizen, especially those belonging to different minority groups has decreased drastically owing to complex bureaucratic norms or simply because of people's lack of connections. In a bid to counter this exclusive nature of the state and to claim some form of political agency, ethnic identity politics has emerged as the primary base for political mobilisation irrespective of how useful or rewarding this approach might be. The synthesis between democracy and ethnic identity has led to the emergence of new socio-political features on the political landscape. This chapter analyses this regional interpretation of democracy, its features and elucidates how ethnic identity, with its primordial connotations, need not be the anti-thesis of modern political systems.

Emergence of a new patronage structure

In this context of changing political and economic structures and static social configurations, a strategic coping mechanism that has been continually used by most ethnic groups in the eastern Himalaya is 'clientalism'. It has been described as a 'rural problem solving system' (Powell in Lemarchand and Legg, 1972:155) that provides a convenient solution to the contradictions inherent in socio-political change and the traditional patterns of political exchange. Clientalism is not a recent introduction in the region but what is novel is the emergence of a new set of patrons wielding power over different fields.

Clientalism is complemented by political patronage which has become increasingly important with the expansion of the state and the increased embeddedness of political parties within state structures. Greater involvement with the bureaucracy is important because it is only with the capture of the state and control over its various extensions that political parties will be able to deliver on their electoral promises whilst at the same time being able to recoup their electoral investment through corruption¹¹³

The expanding developmental state also implies new projects, organizations and other avenues which increase the scope for social as well as economic advancement of individuals and groups, which are often infiltrated by political actors. This is very visible in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal where political patronage has a massive influence upon the delivery of public goods and services. While the ideal modern state, following Weber (1948), can be described as 'legal-rational' meaning that it has political executive, permanent and professional structures to implement policies, the ethos of the ruling, modernizing elite dominating the political settlement may be more feudal than modern (Whaites, 2008: 5). Patronage is one of the forms of everyday politics which has been normalized and accepted in the region. It exists through political, economic or moral support and is often closely associated with corruption.

The role played by the state and the wider-political economy therefore enables a generalisation of the ways in which people attempt to navigate the new economic and political structures, leading to the rapid development of two, often complementary phenomena- bureaucratic clientalism and party patronage.

The influence of this new set of patrons is illustrated by the importance given by local people to new elites over traditional elites like landowners, clan leaders etc. Bishal Limbu of Ilam was a young student activist aligned with one of the local Limbuwan parties. He was very candid about the benefits of supporting a political party rather than paying homage to traditional patrons who were not politically connected and therefore less useful in the event he ran into trouble with the police or needed help with local administration which is dominated by members of the upper caste group. This is similar to the situation in Darjeeling where local residents are poorly represented in the state bureaucracy and thus have to resort to political patronage or rely on the support of local party members to help achieve their aims. This is particularly true of the tea estates where there is a proliferation of trade unions which are linked to local as well as national parties. The unions' success lies in their ability to exert pressure on tea estate companies through strikes in the hills or through political lobbying.

In Sikkim, the political domination by the SDF for more than two decades has led to the foundation of a strong network of political clientalism. However, while political clientalism is of vital importance for electoral success, single party domination and the absence of credible opposition political parties, has diluted the benefits of gaining political patronage. This has led people to seek the support of government officers and bureaucrats. For those without the patronage of the local MLA or a well-placed officer, the chances of attaining government employment or other subsidies from the government is greatly reduced. Therefore, in Sikkim while political patronage is still important, it has to be complemented by bureaucratic clientalism as well. This highlights the persistence of a patronage system, albeit modified to fit to the demands of prevailing political culture and socio-economic exigencies.

In a situation where the state is at the centre of all policies and negotiations influencing the life chances of the population and where the bureaucracy is the state's most important extension, it is not only elected executive members who can be seen as wielding influence and power but also bureaucrats. Bureaucrats' are, in a sense, 'modernizing brokers' because much like traditional patrons or political bosses, bureaucrats may have clients and constituencies who are the beneficiaries or recipients of public services. This system of bureaucratic 'connection' or patronage has become a

fundamental impediment in the developmental process, often determining the life chances and opportunities of individuals and groups. Although traditional patrons still hold relevance in different fields, under the welfare regime the state is the new patron before whom everyone is a client. Thus, in modern democratic systems while the patrons might have changed, the clients remain the same, whether they be the tea garden workers in Darjeeling, the Limbu agriculturist in east Nepal or an unemployed Gurung man/woman in Sikkim.

Although the, ‘unrealistically optimistic expectations that characterizes the state as an agent of change and development’ (Evans, 1992: 141) might have subsided owing to the deficiencies and failure of state-led projects as well as the inclusion of non-state actors, the state still plays an influential role in the lives of its citizens through the public re-distribution system, its commitment to the safety and welfare of its citizens, provision of infrastructure and its promises of development. Whether it be the domineering presence of the state in Sikkim or the stark absence of it in Darjeeling and east Nepal, the form and content of politics in the region is influenced by the stance taken by the state towards ethnicity.

The state has widened its developmental and social welfare agenda. It has also played a crucial role in the politicization of ethnic groups by making concessions and creating favourable conditions for a particular group to predominate over another or by making some cultural feature more valuable than others. For instance, as discussed in previous chapters the SDF favoured socio-economic categories (OBC, 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 category.

Ethnic diversity has been encouraged through the active membership of senior bureaucrats in ethnic organizations,¹¹⁴ something which was previously frowned upon and deemed communal by members of the public. Thus, where the structure of the government becomes potentially more responsive to an electorate by providing opportunities for formal representation for different segments of the population, the structure of opportunities is relatively open and vice versa.¹¹⁵ This presents a classic example of how a democratically elected government has pursued the ethnic agenda in the creation of vote banks and ensure its political longevity. As the prime distributor of

economic and political benefits, the state can effectively create and manipulate insecurities and control the power structure of the society. This also implies that in spite of cultural or historical similarities, the state building experience of every state will vary based on the redistribution strategies that it employs in accordance to the ethnic heterogeneity of the population (Brown, 1994)

Thus, a broad over-view of state-ethnic relations in the three cases reveals two different trends. While a positive, symbiotic relation of mutual dependency exists between ethnic groups and the state in Sikkim and channels ethnic issues/problems into packaged, pre-formulated solutions, a contrasting, uneasy and mostly antagonistic relation exists between the state and different ethnic groups in Nepal and Darjeeling. The nature of this relationship has an important impact on the way ethnicity is understood and expressed in public forums. This relationship defines the perceptions and expectations of all the actors involved and in the case of the eastern Himalaya provides a fertile ground for the evolutions of a new patronage structure which is facilitated by the relationship different groups have with the state. This in turn has given rise to a new spectrum of elites with a wide range of social and political capital which makes them adept at traversing the political terrain, whilst simultaneously giving shape and direction to a regional form of democracy.

The new elites

Understanding ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya allows us a more nuanced understanding of elites because they do not conform to the typical image of exclusive groups or a social category by themselves but in fact operate as 'heuristic devices' (Shore, 2002:4) and 'agents in a process of democratic inclusion' (Spencer, 2002:94). It is through their cultural capital that elites in the region are able to frame grievances, generate awareness and mobilise people. Individuals or groups can be described as elites as long as they are either directly or indirectly in a position to influence very strongly the exercise of political power (Bottomore, 1966:11) and in the eastern Himalaya, an array of individuals and groups from different aspects of the society have emerged as political elites.

This growth and inclusion of a diverse group of elites can be attributed to ethnic politics which requires people with different skill sets in order to be successful in political mobilisation. In Sikkim and Nepal patronage of the landed elite used to play an important role in the feudal society and the landed elite often held multiple roles as tax collectors, arbitrators of legal and domestic cases etc. Changed socio-political circumstances have now led to the emergence of a different set of elites who currently command influence over different and often intersecting fields.¹¹⁶ Multiple actors hold different types of capital which might be valued across a range of fields rather than simply in one, thus an actor is no longer bound to a particular field. For example, a member of the village Panchayat could be a reputed shaman, a landlord and an active party member all at once and therefore the possessor of extensive social capital. Not only do the various 'fields' of politics, culture and community interact and overlap at certain points but ethnic politics also enables people from different backgrounds to move back and forth between these 'fields'. Ethnic politics has opened avenues for people ranging from civil servants to ethnic language teachers who now cross the liminal boundaries of politics and culture. This also shows that the boundaries of politics and culture have changed, thereby highlighting a dialectic relationship between the two as it is difficult to gauge regarding which of the two might have initiated these boundary changes.

While this may not be a particularly new phenomenon, ethnic politics has brought to the fore those categories of people who were earlier considered as unlikely sources of power, influence or in other words, social capital of relevant value. This category of new elites, unlike traditional elites do not form a separate class which is then dependent on the masses for survival nor are they distinct from the people whose interests they represent. The organic evolution of elites highlights rich variation in the types of individuals who steer ethnic politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. Ranging from rural vanguards in eastern hills, to politicians, ethnic activists and ethnic bureaucrats these individuals play an important role in the framing and articulation of ethnicity.

Elites in the eastern Himalaya can broadly be divided into three different categories- ethnic elites, bureaucratic elites and political elites. While all three categories function within their respective fields, it is usually a combination of elites that foster the articulation and manifestation of a particular form of ethnicity. Their motivations are

highly diverse, ranging from preservation of culture to reservation of seats in the legislature, from purely instrumental to simply cultural. Whilst it is necessary to evaluate the individuals and groups who are actively involved in politics, following Zald (1996: 269), it is equally important to recognize the contribution of ‘moral entrepreneurs’-journalists’, ministers, community leaders, writers who attempt to define the issues, invent metaphors, attribute blame and define tactics. These moral entrepreneurs are, however, not present in equal measure in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal which affects the framing as well as public discussion of ethnic grievances in each area.

In Nepal, assertion of the Limbu identity is championed primarily by ethnic and political elites whose very emergence is a reaction against bureaucratic elitism which is ethnically biased and has saturated every state institution. The Limbuwan movement is spearheaded by the KYC whose members are also affiliated to national and regional parties and can thus present the case of the Limbus to upper caste party members who, more often than not, are regional party Presidents. Although the party’s proverbial whip may limit the influence of KYC members but they have had some success in encouraging national parties to acknowledge the ethnic issue, at least at the regional level. Limbu ethnic elites range from individuals like Ram Limbu, teacher at Ilam multi-campus who is an active member of the NGO INSEC, and Pradeep Limbu who is a lawyer in the local court and the president of the KYC (at the time of fieldwork) to young members like Asha Tumbapo, a social worker and spokesperson for women’s rights. These elites hold great cultural capital amongst the Limbu community and move effortlessly between different ‘fields’, whether political or social. Their ethnicity is the primary resource that gives them socio-political efficacy as the Limbus rely on them not only to negotiate with the state on their behalf but also to make their own culture legible to them. Ethnic activists are influential mobilizing agents who through their activities as members of the KYC have been fundamental in supporting not just the Limbu cause but that of the indigenous community overall. Simultaneously and almost by default, it has reminded the community of their economic and cultural subjugation under the Hindu monarchy.

On the other side of the border in Darjeeling, as discussed in previous chapters the present political situation reveals an intense process of internalisation of the Gorkha’s valour and sacrifice primarily by the political elites comprising of grass root party

members, academics and literary figures. These political elites ensure percolation of the arguments and imagery associated with the Gorkha to the community through the village *samaj* or the local community council who make political participation a social obligation. The role of local mobilisers like trade union, youth leaders and women activists in these areas cannot be disregarded as they too are the holders of much social capital and thus successful in reinforcing the debates and arguments of indifference and ethnic discrimination meted out by the West Bengal government towards the Gorkhas. While writers and other artists engage with the population on a creative level, it is the political elite, who are engaged in popularising this image to the other members of the society through fiery speeches and other 'ethnicity-building' activities like *phul-pati* and *shobhayatra* (cultural processions related to Hindu festivals of Dasain and Tihar). The Gorkhaland movement, like most ethnic movements, also utilises pre-existing identities which may be re-imagined and reintegrated in order to solidify the collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Grievances are framed not only in terms of discrimination but also by drawing comparisons with Sikkim, thereby moulding public opinion in the favour of a separate state which will ensure all round development as well as attain national recognition for all Nepalis living in India. Thus, identity politics in Darjeeling is shaped by the combined efforts of the political leaders and other independent members of the society who promote a defensive, insecure Gorkha as the only means of achieving socio-political emancipation from the state of West Bengal.

Unlike Darjeeling and Nepal, Sikkim has not seen any explicit, violent political turmoil against the state or even amongst ethnic groups. Political participation by the civil society is also negligent, emerging only when employment or other benefits are being threatened by non-Sikkimese people. The legislative and executive strands of the state are also closely interlinked as every department is headed by an elected representative, irrespective of their prior experience or educational qualifications. The assertion of ethnic identity is thus also neatly guided by the bureaucratic elites who are also ethnic elites and who follow the format set out by the political elites. Ethnic issues are framed in a way that is palatable to the state and which is then endorsed and explained to the ethnic members by their respective ethnic associations.

Although ethnic associations include representatives from rural areas, increasing formalization of rules, practices and the emphasis on literacy has reduced them to mere bystanders. Ethnic members in the rural areas may be unable to understand the rules, regulations or even the benefits under a particular category or otherwise lack the social confidence to plead their case. By contrast, ethnic elites who are well assimilated into bureaucratic circles can understand the bureaucratic language and the rules governing rights and can therefore articulate and lobby on ethnic issues with the state in a manner intelligible only to bureaucrats. In contrast to Darjeeling and Nepal, in Sikkim the framework of grievance articulation is handed down by the state and then used by those who are both ethnic and bureaucratic elites to forge and mobilise ethnic sentiments. Thus the field of influence of these elites extends not only towards their own ethnic members but also outwards towards other members of the bureaucracy who control the resources that they are either entitled to or are seeking.

These elites whose social capital is based on their position and access to the government, also constantly switch their field of influence between their ethnic members, mostly in the rural areas, and their colleagues in the government. At the same time linguists and practitioners of culture have consistently worked silently to uphold their respective languages and cultures even during times when there was little or no state support. Though they might not be executive members of ethnic associations, without linguists and cultural practitioners the urban, Gangtok-based ethnic associations would not be able to sustain and make claims of cultural authenticity. Most of the ethnic associations are still at a nascent stage and the full impact of their long-term activities is yet to be assessed but the role of the ethnic/bureaucratic elite has been crucial in negotiations with the government as well as in framing issues of cultural preservation amongst ethnic members. Ethnic associations have been successful in revitalising interest in their own communities and articulating the need for cultural preservation a sentiment which emerged as common amongst urban as well as rural ethnic members.

Political elites

Apart from the important function performed by ethnic associations, another significant aspect of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya is the emergence of regional parties that are explicitly ethnic in their political agenda. Political parties in the Darjeeling hills, whether the GNLF, AIGL or GJM are all striving for an ethnic homeland for the Gorkhas; an ethnic category constructed out of common social, economic and political exigencies rather than through ascribed bonds of kinship and lineage. In Sikkim, there exist various political parties which cater to ethnic aspirations but none that is dedicated solely to an ethnic group or an ethnic cause. Organised ethnic politics and ethnic parties have existed in the Darjeeling hills for quite some time now and in east Nepal, the emergence of ethnic parties and their participation in regional elections with the sole aim of creating Limbuwan highlight a political trend whereby ethnic aspirations are being channelled through avenues accepted by the state. This has increased the importance of ethnic identity in contesting the state through democratic avenues than to engage in open, violent contestation against it.

The modus operandi of most political parties in Nepal is violence, extortion, unpredictable road-blocks, processions and other disturbances to public life and the Limbuwan parties are no exception. However, the Limbuwan parties are not engaged in an armed resistance against the state, nor are they seeking a separation from the state. Formed in the aftermath of the second Jan Andolan, the regional parties of eastern Nepal are a curious mix of contradictions. The names of the parties for example-*Sanghiya Limbuwan Rashtriya Morcha* (*Federal Limbuwan National Front*) clearly indicate the purpose, aims and the ethnic demography that they seek to attract despite their claims of being multi-ethnic entities.

INSERT PICTURE 8

Offices of 'Limbuwan Parties', Ilam
Photo: Mona Chettri, 2010

These groups strive to claim a Limbuwan where the Limbus will enjoy a degree of prior rights (*agra-adhikar*) unlike all the other ethnic groups living in that area and this arrangement is seen as the most effective measure to ensure democracy and safeguard minority rights. Intellectuals from within the community itself have accused these

regional parties of representing an 'intellectual vacuum', however, these parties have been successful in identifying and articulating socio-economic grievances of the members of the ethnic communities. This trend was aptly summarised by Madhav Chettri, a senior Unified Marxist-Leninist leader who said, 'using ethnic ideology and slogans the exploiter class has equated the deprived class with an ethnic category. In contemporary Nepal it is ethnic politics that has become more important than class based politics.' While some conflation of class and ethnicity is possible, this is an idea which has been taken to the extreme and used in the political domain by political parties who conveniently ignore the ground reality that there are rich Limbus as well as poor Bahun/Chettri groups in east Nepal. The electoral success of ethnic parties is calculated on the basis of the population of ethnic groups whose interests they are supposedly representing. 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 too. When translated to the regional context demographic majority converts numerically dominant ethnic groups into dependable vote banks, a formula that continues to pay dividends in Sikkim. In the proposed Limbuwan, the Limbu majority holds great value leading to the dependence on ethnicity for the credibility or even longevity of any political party.

Participation in democratic processes like elections, party formation, mobilisation etc. on an ethnic agenda and the candid acknowledgement of their ethnic biases has increased the socio-political acceptance of ethnicity as a political resource. On one hand, this has created opportunities for ethnic elites to make a foray into local level politics and on the other, Limbu politicians whose sole identification was previously through their political affiliation are now renewing and asserting their ethnic ties and culture in order to take advantage of apolitical situation which has now become receptive towards ethnicity. This situation has given rise to a new layer of elites who are influential probably because of their influence and social standing within their community rather than their standing in the political party.

Political efficacy now depends upon the efficiency with which a political party is able to tap into local as well as ethnic grievances, something which can only be detrimental to a party if ignored. Ethnicity may not be the only factor that the electorate takes into consideration but it is emerging as one of the most important factors by which a

party is now judged. As proven by the 2013 elections in Nepal, voters may not necessarily move across party lines but there is a growing demand for national parties to address ethnic issues. For example, according to Upendra Jabegu, the poor performance of the UML in the 2008 Constituent Assembly election, coming in third after the Maoists and Nepali Congress, was a direct consequence of its non-committal attitude towards the Limbuwan issue.

The emergence of these regional parties indicates an opening of the political space which is making the democratic agenda more inclusive. Despite their limited 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 that they are members of. On the other hand, the blatant demand for Limbuwan and exclusive rights for the Limbus has an appealing tone to it and thus 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.

Elites are a crucial link in formulating opinions and articulating them in the most politically efficient manner. While the prominence of the 'political field' had not diminished, its boundaries had nonetheless been trespassed by the 'cultural field' in the eastern Himalaya which could be attributed to the importance of the emergence of a new set of political actors who had previously only belonged to the field of cultural reproduction. As discussed earlier, politics needs to be legitimized by social actors who can authenticate and justify demands for cultural preservation, recognition, development and assistance by the state. Thus as ethnic politics becomes more dependent on material culture and symbolism, the need for political actors with social recognition within particular ethnic groups will rise significantly. The increasing interaction of politics and culture has led to a higher social position for those individuals who hold important roles in the cultural field which in turn highlights a greater transference of social capital to economic and political capital and is a phenomenon which is at the heart of regional democracy in the eastern Himalaya.

Expressing agency through ethnic politics

Elites, cultural and/or political, play an important role in the framing and articulation of grievances as well as negotiating with other political actors, especially the state. This raises questions regarding the agency of the people who are not directly involved in political activism. The participation and motivation of those who are neither elites nor executive members of ethnic associations or political parties also form an important component of our understanding of ethnic politics and the eventual ‘vernacularisation of democracy’ (see Michelutti, 2014). Although people’s agency might be restricted or limited, they are not bystanders to the political and economic changes around them. They can participate, criticize and are affected by political and economic changes in numerous ways. Thus people’s participation and physical, moral and financial support is one of the key variables that makes ethnic politics possible. However, to assume that one ‘chooses’ one ethnic identity over another is problematic because what may be considered a choice could actually just be an awakening or assertion of elements from a set of dispositions.

Choices and motivations to act are deeply determined by the *habitus* or dispositions, which are the product of the social environment in which an ethnic group is located along with the influence of the wider, external political and economic structures around them. Race, gender, religion or the kinship system that one is born into also form an important component of the world view of groups and individuals and one that determines the level of political interaction of an individual. Although specific socio-historical and economic surroundings do have an impact on the individual’s choices and disposition, it is also possible to extend this to conceptualise the notion of a ‘micro-habitus’ which is made up of an ethnic group’s position in the world economic system, international regimes and of course their position within the nation. These factors are all socially reproduced over generations and inform people’s perception of their position and status in the political field. For instance, the ‘micro-habitus’ of the Limbus composed of the position in the social and economic hierarchy in Nepal as well as their historical background as the indigenous group of Limbuwan. Both these factors coalesce to

construct a certain imagery of how the Limbus perceive themselves as well as the world around them, which then affects identity construction and political mobilization.

Whilst it would be wrong to assume that individuals and groups can simply choose which identity to make meaningful and that ethnic identities are a representation of that choice, two broad generalisations can be made about ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya; firstly, that the choice of ethnicity as a political identity might be driven primarily by instrumental motives but non-instrumental, emotive motives may also be an important factor in the choice of a political identity and secondly, that these choices are a combination of numerous instrumental and impulsive factors, the boundaries of which are liminal and therefore intersecting. Thus, norms of political behaviour, the role of contacts and networks and what people expect to gain from engagement in politics all constitute the micro-foundations of political culture and set limits to what is achievable and which types of developmental efforts can be planned and implemented (Rudd, 1999:237).

Agency is difficult to gauge even when ethnic identification has resulted in mass mobilization as seen in Darjeeling and east Nepal. Questions regarding agency of the common man/woman must begin with an interrogation of what agency might imply to different people. Agency might range from participation in ethnic movements and political parties to negotiation with the elites but in the context of the ethnic politics, the agency to make a particular ethnic identity meaningful in the political and social realm is of primary importance. However, accepting this also requires an acknowledgment of the numerous hierarchies within an ethnic group which filter the agency of the actors so that by the time an individual's choice is enacted, much of its original essence and intent is either lost or altered.

While trying to unravel the question of ethnic politics, agency and choice it becomes comfortable and convenient to imagine that ethnicity is one of the rational choices that an individual or a group can make when having to make cost-effective choices. Instrumentality is an important feature of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya and this argument can be extended to try and understand the different ethnic response to the state- why Nepalis in Sikkim find it beneficial to identify themselves as Limboo, Rai, or Tamang while at the same time, Nepalis in Darjeeling use Gorkha as their means of

identification. However, to assume that a human being is always a homo *economicus*, in a permanent state of competition over limited resources, economic advantages, wealth, power or status (Malesevic, 2002), would be an inadequate explanation of ethnic politics in the region. Whether it be reservation, employment or even a separate state, access and control over the re-distribution of resources is one of the main motivations for ethnic politics. However, the unrelenting demand for symbolic goods like language recognition, cultural preservation, citizenship, official recognition of festivals cannot be neglected. These symbolic goods cannot be deemed to be less important than material goods because it is these cultural items that form the basis of identity politics and which can be used for effective negotiation with the state.

This instrumental characteristic of ethnic groups also needs to take into account that different individuals in a group might value different things. Guilliano (2000:296) makes a crucial point that individual political affiliation cannot be determined by ethnic affiliation as individuals might possess extremely strong ethnic identities and a sense of group belonging but this need not directly translate into political action. This is amply exemplified in all the three cases and most explicitly in the case of the Limbuwan movement, where the regional Limbuwan parties, despite stirring ethnic sentiments, were not able to generate mass support and garner votes from the Limbu population who were reluctant to switch their traditional affiliation with the national parties and/or not sufficiently convinced by the strength of the movement. Group preferences do not exist in some pre-made, latent form ready to be mobilized. Rather, it is important to analyse how support and confidence is acquired and how the relationship between the voter, politicians and issues determines the use of ethnicity as a resource to ensure the maximum benefit for a particular ethnic group.

This is evident in the three areas where ethnic identity and the concomitant politics is valued for the transcendental benefits that it brings to the members of a particular ethnic group. Contemporary Sikkimese politics is marked by the polarization between the minority but historically dominant Bhutia-Lepcha community and the majority Nepali community as well as by divisions within the Nepali ethnic group itself. This comes especially at a time when identity as a Sikkimese has emerged as a moot point of contention. Along with supporting the discovery, exploitation and essentialisation of the

tangible aspects of culture, socio-economic categories have altered the members of ethnic groups themselves as they are given the opportunity to reconstruct their social history as being native to Sikkim as opposed to being referred to as migrants and coolies (Gurung 2010: 248-49). With each ethnic group undergoing a degree of new found interest in the reconstruction of their 'original' cultures, politics in Sikkim thus provides a greater sense of belonging and identification as Sikkimese even though it may not bring the desired economic outcome. In the Darjeeling hills, the word *Gorkha* refers to all the Nepalis living in India; when used in a political context, it refers to all the people of the Darjeeling Hills, including the Lepchas, Tibetans, Marwaris and even Bengalis, while at the same time creating a distinction from the Sikkimese-Nepali. As the boundaries of the peoples the term is supposed to encompass have become more ambivalent, the political saliency of the term is heightened in the pursuit of federal statehood. Finally, in east Nepal, although assertion of the Limbu identity does not compete with the national identity of a Nepalese, it does make a breakaway from the cultural hegemony of the upper caste Hill groups. Therefore, the importance of transcendental benefits of ethnic politics to different groups and individuals cannot be under-estimated. Although seemingly simple, emotive and straightforward, ethnic politics is actually a *process* as well as an outcome of numerous, complex and often interrelated incentives and dis-incentives and in the presence of local, regional and international factors that ultimately determine the nature and content of ethnic grievances, actions and outcomes.

Regional interpretation of democracy

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 organisations and other contexts within which ethnic divisions are institutionalised (Beissinger 2008; Chandra 2005:236). This fusion of a new political system and older, traditional patterns of state-society relations has led to local, regional 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 and will inhibit other forms of mobilisation 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' nor de-stabilises democracy but has, in fact, helped establish democracy as a political culture by making it inclusive, accessible and relevant to people.

Contemporary politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal show that the ultimate end of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya is control, access or re-distribution of resources. Identity politics in the region is more focussed on seeking access rather than the destabilization of the established political system. This has helped breed 'machine politics' whereby, according to Scott (1969:1143), the machine is a non-ideological organization interested less in political principle than in securing and holding office for its leaders and distributing income to those who run and work for it. It relies on what it accomplishes in a concrete way for its supporters, not on what it stands for. This is almost the exact nature of political parties in the eastern Himalaya, where it is difficult to distinguish the agenda of one party from another when each is preoccupied with the capture of political power. In machine politics a party emphasizes those inducements which are appropriate to the loyalty pattern among its clientele and responding to its environment, the machine is skilled in both the political distribution of public works through 'pork-barrel' legislation and in the dispensation of jobs and favours through more informal channels (ibid:1147).

Ethnic politics has also resulted in what is known as 'ethnic branch stacking' which refers to the practice of recruiting people of ethnic background, usually from particular ethnic groups, according to concentrations in the particular electorate and often from groups who are seen as traditional rivals of another factions 'stackees' (Zapalla, 1998: 383) and without which, ethnic politics would not be possible. This is evident in all three cases where political support and membership has been sought through the

evocation of ethnic affiliations, whether it be the Gorkhas, Limbus or as seen in the case of Sikkim, even a particular socio-economic category like the OBC, ST or MBC.

In a reversal of roles aptly captured by Melluci (1989:80 in Pieterse and McAllister, 1996:32) it is the ethnic groups and not the state, as a functional administrative machinery, that have become extractive by using cultural rights as their political weapon to redress historical injustices. Past inequalities and grievances thus become an important component in securing rights and privileges for the future.

While ethnicity itself can be considered an independent variable, ethnic politics is highly dependent on the approaches to it by the state and other political actors within that political environment. This is visible in Nepal where ethnic demands which were once considered antithetical and detrimental to the integrity and the core unity of a nation-state are now entertained as legitimate demands by the state (Hangen, 2007). The formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988 can also be seen as recognition of the Gorkha community by the West Bengal government and the establishment of DGHC and the GTA a conciliatory move. One of the implications of this has been that now the state not only accepts ethnic groups but it also initiates and legitimises ethnic politics by the creation as well as recognition of other groups.

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 by widening the base through which people can contest the state and stake political claims and collective discontent can be channelled. Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal showcase how ethnic politics has created space for a new layer of cultural elites and new forms of social capital that are politically relevant thereby promoting a more inclusive form of democracy.

Madsen et al (2011) succinctly describe the connection between democracy, in terms of 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” (ibid: 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.

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 and 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. It also challenges perceptions of how identity-based politics is used instrumentally to dilute democracy because, on the contrary, it promotes inclusivity and a degree of political empowerment to those who have not traditionally been political participants.

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 democracy more inclusive, accessible and relevant to those whose transition to democracy is recent. This has led to the evolution of 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. Problems persist within this form of ethnic democracy, for example-resource capture by ethnic elites, failure to address socio-economic grievances successfully, lack of consensus on tangible heritage and ethnic competition. Nonetheless, 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 thereby legitimising 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.

Being Nepali Across Borders

This research for the book began with a series of questions and the attempt to answer those entailed long journeys, the shedding of my inhibitions and preconceptions, a great deal of listening and conversations over hot water, tea and millet beer(*tongba*) amongst other offerings. These journey became more about understanding people, their lives and developing friendships and less about whether their answers could be used as 'data'. These experiences were important in obliterating conceptual as well as cultural borders. I travelled through three different political units but these areas were an extension of the same hills, inhabited by the same ethnic groups with familiar social configurations, similar socio-economic issues and identical approaches to resolving them. Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal are geo-political borderlands but given their centrality to the history of people, religion, culture and politics in the region, they can be best defined as cultural cross-roads with historical and unique connections to different countries of the region. The book was an attempt to portray the lives and politics of the people of the eastern Himalaya.

Weak *intra-ethnic* boundaries, linguistic and cultural amalgamation of different ethnic groups, geographical interconnectedness and trans-border cultural contact have all combined to enable the active re-construction of ethnic culture and history. The malleability of ethnic identity and its increasing importance in the public sphere has converted Nepali ethnic identity into an important political resource. This process has been facilitated by institutional changes and the inculcation of democracy as a standard political practice in the eastern Himalaya which has enabled the proliferation of new bases of collective action. This instrumental use of ethnic identity is heightened by the fact that there is not a level playing field in a region which is experiencing accelerated changes in social mobility, aspirations which in turn, is re-defining state-society relations.

Understanding ethnic politics therefore necessitates a contextual appreciation of the socio-economic and political structures and their apparent disconnect with the existential realities and aspirations of the people which ultimately fuels collective action. Ethnic politics is also a process, the strength and direction of which is determined by the

institutional and cognitive boundaries that maintain exclusivity and the existence or absence of institutional support. This is well illustrated by the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya who are experiencing a cultural transition so intense that ethnic homogeneity is slowly being replaced by the assertion of diverse and exclusive ethnic identities. Contemporary Nepali politics illustrates a trans-border political phenomenon wherein exhortations of social, economic and political problems through an ethnic framework has fast become a trend in the eastern Himalaya. The emphasis on different aspects of the Nepali ethnic identity can be attributed to powerful ethnic frameworks constructed by political actors such as ethnic associations and ethnic political parties that are easily resonant with the people, provide ready bases of mobilisation. These frameworks are constructed out of knowledge and belief systems that are prevalent, widely known and accessible within a particular ethnic group. Politicisation, then, simply requires the re-configuration of pre-existing bases of knowledge as well as relationships which can thereafter be utilised to make political claims on the state.

At the same time, there is a marked variation in how the Nepalis living in this region choose to assert their ethnic identity politically, a choice which is guided by the borders of institutional and governing frameworks within which they live. Thus, while ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya transcends political borders, its form and content is determined by the same borders.

On the other hand, this phase also represents the dynamism inherent in ethnic groups and the capacity to re-construct histories, tradition and culture as a response to changing political and economic structures. In spite of the internal variation in local politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal, the identities that are made politically valid and the ways in which ethnic grievances are expressed by the Nepalis living in all three areas bear testimony to the dynamic nature of ethnic groups and challenge stereotypes of political ambivalence and nonchalance that are assumed to be the preserve of the people of the region.

Of ethnic politics and democratic cultures

However, the persistence and prolific ubiquity of the ‘ethnic argument’ leads us to question how ethnic identity, with its emphasis on kinship networks, cultural attributes, co-exists with democracy, a modern political institution that has no room for ethnic exclusivity. Historically, the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya have played an important role in state-formation of the entire region and contemporary ethnic politics is a continuation of that trend. In the eastern Himalaya democracy exists and indeed thrives alongside ethnic identity. Both facilitate and legitimise the existence of the other. Ethnic identity, through its claims on group membership, enables collective mobilisation, consensus formation, direct political action and most importantly, vote banks which are all components crucial for a functional democracy. In turn, these democratic practices have led to a renewed interest in ‘ethnicity-building’ activities which contribute to the sustained growth and preservation of ethnic culture, whether authentic or not. This relationship has resulted in a regional interpretation of democracy which is dependent, to a certain extent, on the politicisation of the material culture of ethnic groups, which is itself a product of active construction and re-construction by different ethnic/political actors. While this is very much an organic process, it is one that has been facilitated, directly or indirectly, by the state and other national and international organisations.

This regional form of democracy has made political actors and elites out of a wide spectrum of ordinary people, who previously might not have thought of their actions as political. The ethnic/political actors have made democracy their own. They have taken the rudimentary political structure and given it shape and form that represents them the best and in the eastern Himalaya, this has been achieved through the utilisation of ethnic identity. This regional form of democracy is an illustration of people’s politics wherein basic existential issues lie at the core of popular politics. Demands for equal political and economic opportunities, better governance, and control over resources are all important indicators of the political and economic status of the people of the eastern Himalaya. These existential struggles also limit engagement with issues that may be important but do not necessarily have a direct impact on the everyday lives of the people. Issues of environmental degradation, caste-based discrimination, violence against women,

trafficking are highly prevalent in the region but in the contest for public interest and collection action, are eclipsed by the engagement in ethnic politics because of its impact on a larger collective of people.

As discussed in great length, socio-economic grievances exist in the eastern Himalaya and have a real impact on people but are usually understood through the ethnic framework and their resolution is sought through the use of ethnic identity. This leads us to ask whether the prevalence of ethnic politics can be attributed to the relative ease and convenience with which ethnic collective consciousness can be roused, pre-existing networks activated and because ethnic politics is better suited to the insular nature of socio-political interaction in the region?

Ethnic politics as people's politics

There are many reasons why people engage in ethnic politics but to assume that it is a convenient choice would be to trivialize the dedication and investment of time, effort and resources in the revitalization of ethnic culture, which may not necessarily lead to any tangible gains best exemplified by the failure of political parties to win simply on the basis of an ethnic agenda. Darjeeling is an exception here as every political party has to espouse the demand for a separate ethnic homeland for the Gorkhas if it is to maintain its political relevance. Despite limited electoral victories, ethnic politics persists and is still supported by people even though they may not cross party lines, vote for ethnic parties or engage in violent politics.

Therefore, the popularity of ethnic politics cannot be reduced to the convenient revitalisation of culture and ethnic networks which therefore forces us to re-orient our gaze and recognize politics in un-prescribed places and in different forms. Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya pushes conceptual boundaries of what politics should comprise of and look like and also challenges clichéd understandings of democracy which is limited simply to the act of casting votes. Consensus building, political mobilisation, negotiations leading up to the actual act of casting votes are also important components of democracy which are actually sites of intense political contestations between different groups of people. There is a need to engage in a micro-level analysis of what democracy actually

means to the people, what they hope to achieve out of it and finally how is it enacted in the public and political sphere and this book hopes to have initiated some discussion in understanding people and politics from their point of view.

Ethnic politics is people's politics because without their personal interest and investment in terms of time and skills, it would never be as prolific and pervasive as it is today. This implies that there are more people interested and involved in politics than ever before. Material benefits might act as an incentive but there a large number of people who are active participants despite the lack of tangible gains. Therefore, in order to understand ethnic politics, it is imperative to recognize it in places and actions that were not considered as political prior to this cross-border resurgence of identity politics. Practitioners of culture, language instructors and ethnic associations are all engaged in ethnic politics because their skill set and social capital can now be easily converted to political capital. Teaching Rai language may not be a directly political act but linguistic expertise can be utilised to generate ethnic consciousness which is essential for making collective claims on the state through the ballot box. The eastern Himalaya is thus abuzz with the re-discovery, invention and modification of ethnic culture in a way that aligns best with the expected idea of either a Scheduled Tribe, Adivasi or a Gorkha.

The increasing popularity of ethnic politics can also be attributed to, ironically, the apolitical nature of cultural politics where participants do not have to make elaborate displays of their political aspirations. This can be achieved simply by wearing certain clothes or participating in ethnic activities which are accepted as basic rights of an individual and therefore go uncontested. What can be deduced from the current trend of regional politics is that the aim of ethnic politics and activism is not to de-stabilise the state or the prevailing political structure but rather to create channels through which to facilitate a better dialogue with the state for increased control or access to public goods.

As mentioned above, the existence of socio-economic grievances, the lack of a level playing field and the strategic use of all resources available has led to the proliferation of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya. However, this form of politics is not without its flaws and is as easily susceptible to resource capture by the elites, rural-urban divides and political failure as any other form of politics. This is expected and even unavoidable to a certain extent but what ethnic politics does provide is political

accountability and greater agency as a result of two very important factors. Firstly, ethnic groups may work in co-operation with one another but each group has a base of support which is limited to its members. This promotes greater access to other members and therefore greater accountability for actions and decisions taken on their behalf. Secondly, ethnic politics is dependent on tangible expressions of culture which is actively constructed, popularised and adopted into the folds of everyday life by the people. This lends greater agency not only to practitioners of culture but also to the ordinary people who are bestow legitimacy to the these cultural items by accepting and incorporating them in their cultural practices. This places them in a better position to accept, deny or challenge representations of them, their identity and their concerns. Thus, embedded within ethnic politics are the crucial components of democracy- collective mobilisation, accountability and agency of ordinary people on the borderlands of South Asia.

¹ Traditional attire of Bhutia and Tibetan women

² Kalimpong in Darjeeling District, West Bengal functioned as a thriving trade route to Tibet. It has strong historical and cultural connections with Tibet which was strengthened with the settlement of Tibetan refugees in the early 1950. 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 culture of the eastern Himalaya.

³ 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' with homogenizes cultural diversity into features that conform either to the national or international discourse on ethnic groups.

⁴ In the caste hierarchy imposed by Jung Bahadur Rana, *matwali* was the alcohol drinking groups which were below the Brahmins and Kshatriyas but above the untouchable castes. In spite of being a Chettri, which is a high caste I have mixed ancestry as my paternal grandmother belongs to the Magar ethnic group and my mother belongs to the indigenous Lepcha ethnic group. This inter-mixing, according to my *matwali* friends in Nepal diluted my sharp 'Aryan facial features'.

⁵ 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 whether this was done to increase sales in east Nepal by tapping into the heightened ethnic sentiment which is strongly related to land.

⁶ 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.

⁷ A mongoloid ethnic group speaking a complex Tibeto-Burmese language, originally inhabiting central-western Nepal.

⁸ The ritual services of the different castes were predominantly war related functions which focussed upon the king. This ensemble was called upon each year to assist in the bloody sacrifices on behalf of the sovereign during the annual celebration of war. This cosmological order which exists today only in rituals was in the past evoked in ritualised warfare. Warfare was the only activity that brought the entire society together (Lecomte-Tilouine and Gellner, 2004:14).

⁹ Burghart (1984) explains elaborately three indigenous territorial concepts of possession, realm and country and their respective sources of legitimation in proprietary, ritual and ancestral authority. The king maintained relationship with his subjects on numerous levels which transcended the level of the physical to that of the ritual and like the other rulers in the Ganges basin, claimed his sovereignty by exercising proprietary authority upon their possessions (*muluk*) and the ritual authority within their realm (*desa*). Included within the monarch's possessions and realm were various countries (*des*) in which the king's tenants or subjects were natives who claimed certain rights to their land and their way of life on the basis of certain ancestry.

¹⁰ In the eastern hills, the Limbus had been incorporated into the Gorkha kingdom in 1772-4 after much war and a final reconciliation on the basis of which they were granted far reaching autonomy over their traditional lands. See Pradhan 1991.

¹¹ According to Michaels (1997:80, 82) in Hindu South Asia, the protection of the cow was often connected with Hinduism. As for the Shah dynasty, the very name of their ancestral seat Gorkha or *Goraksa* in Sanskrit literally meant the protector of cows and in a secondary meaning it meant the 'protector of the earth' which is believed to be as nourishing as the cow.

¹² Dasain is one of the most important Hindu festivals which after the conquest by Prithvi Narayan also became a cultural symbol of Hindu domination. The ritual involves accepting *tika* on the forehead (vermillion coloured rice mixed with curd) which came to be associated with a sign of inferiority to and dependency on the one giving the *tika*. Headmen throughout Nepal were required to travel to their district center to receive *tika* from the representative of the king thereby using cultural symbols for state consolidation (Forbes, 1999:114).

¹³ It was one of the most important royal intrigues in the Gorkha durbar which was orchestrated by the Queen regent Rajya Lakshmi Devi to oust the reigning King Rajendra and her step-sons in order to install her son Prince Ranendra as the heir to the throne. Almost all the ministers supporting the King were either killed or exiled (Panday, 1973: 50).

¹⁴ He later adopted the title Rana and claimed Rajput ancestry.

¹⁵ During the Rana regime the society was ordered according to orthodox Hindu notions. In the *Muluki Ain* all groups were equally called *jat* but the key distinctions, supported by law and the judicial system, were between the wearers of the sacred thread, the *Tagadhari* who were also the elite of the society and the rest who were known as *Matwali* or alcohol consuming class. The subordinate groups were themselves divided into enslaveable and non-enslaveable categories and into 'clean castes' and 'untouchable castes' (Gellner, 2007:1823).

¹⁶ Speakers of the Tibeto-Burman language in eastern Nepal and Sikkim are collectively called *Kirat/Kiranti/Kirata*. This group is comprised of the Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, Yakkha and Chepangs (Whelpton, 2005:13).

¹⁷ In 1886, the Nepalese government made it legal for non-Limbus (especially Bahuns and Chettris) to convert all *kipat* land that had been mortgaged to them, to raikar, which could not be reverted to *kipat* once the mortgage was paid off. After widespread dissent over this law, the state banned further transfers of *kipat* land to raikar, but those which had already been transferred were not reversed (Subba, 1999:40).

¹⁸ At the same time the *Muluki Ain* allowed for social mobility of certain groups who were more amenable to the economic as well as religious systems of the government (English, 1982:90). For example, Fournier (1974:63 in English, 1982:86) states that status of the Sunwar group was raised to the class occupied by the Magar and Gurung as a result of their petition to Jung Bahadur Rana to permit them to practice Hinduism and offer settlements to Brahmins and Chettris.

¹⁹ Nepali has no single term which conveys the meaning of the English term 'race'. *Jati* is commonly used in the same context as race but its basic meaning is species or type as distinct from *jat*, which is caste, which in Nepali context is the same as ethnic group. However, these terms are almost interchangeably used (Hutt, 1997:116).

²⁰ Caplan (1990:132; 2006) attributes the labelling and recruitment of some ethnic groups, especially from the Gorkha district in central Nepal as 'martial tribes' or Gurkha to Brian Hodgson who was the British Resident in Kathmandu (1833-43).

²¹ During this period there were no political demarcations of territory and thus there was free movement of people, especially Limbus, between what would be demarcated as Sikkim and Nepal after the Treaty of Sigauli (1816).

²² The eastern Himalaya and Brahmaputra valley of the Indo-Myanmar frontier comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya and now Sikkim is identified as a single geographic and socio-economic identity. However as Shimray (2004: 4637) points out the term 'north-east India' is of recent origin. The expansion of British colonies in the eastern frontier began with the conquest of Bengal in 1757. The eastward expansion of the East India Company brought the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills into the folds of the empire. This region was however also interspersed with princely states (viz. Manipur, Tripura, Khasi states) each of which had a discrete treaty relation with the East India Company (Lacina, 2009:1001). Thus, early Nepali migration was through British territories that were constantly being brought into the imperial political economy rather than just the passage through north-east India as we know it today.

²³ Gorkha, Gorkhali and Nepali were used interchangeably but since the word functions as a marker of distinction from the Nepalese, the term Gorkha has gained popularity in recent years.

²⁴ Settlement of the Gorkha armies in the western Himalayas dates back to 1793 where they conquered Kumaon in present day Uttarakhand. Dehradun, which is in the state of Uttarakhand as well as the Garhwal hills in the western Himalayas are well known cantonment area of the Gorkha Regiment. The oldest known Gorkha association was the Himachal Punjab Gorkha Association established in 1916 and the Gorkhali Sudhar Sabha established in 1928. These associations became the foundation for political mobilization and formation of the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League in 1943 by Damber Singh Gurung. Source: http://www.gorkhapharisangh.com/pdf/Gorkhas_in_Paschimanchal.pdf (Accessed: 21/02/2012).

²⁵ Parasmani Pradhan (1898-1986) played a very important role in the standardization and development of the Nepali language. He published *Chandrika* from 1918 to 1920 and *Bharati* from 1948 to 1957. See Chalmers, 2003 for an in-depth discussion on the development of a Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling.

²⁶ His vocabulary shows words derived from Sanskrit which are still spoken by common people. His spellings reflected colloquial pronunciation For example- 'hirday' for *hridaya* (heart), 'sor' for *svar* (voice). His contributions laid foundations for later work. He translated the Bible into Nepali as well Hans Christen Anderson stories for children (Pradhan, 1984:49).

²⁷ While Hindi and English were used as a medium of instruction in schools in Sikkim, Nepali steadily became the bridge language between different communities and slowly the lingua franca of the kingdom (Hiltz, 2003:76).

²⁸ APATAN was an acronym for the founders of this literary organisation-Agam Singh Tamang, Padam Singh Subba, Tulsi Bahadur Chettri and Nima Wangdi.

²⁹ Indra Bahadur Rai (b.1928) is one of the most influential Nepali writers. Based in Darjeeling, questions of cultural identity are prominent in his work. He was the first recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976 (Poddar and Prasad, 2009).

³⁰ Agam Singh Giri (1928-1971) is considered as one of the most important poets representing the Indian-Nepalis. According to Rai (1994:153) Giri gave expression through his poems to the feeling of frustration prevalent among his people and dealt with issues of identity of the Indian Nepalis.

³¹ The bark of the Cinchona tree is utilized to make Quinine, an anti-malarial drug. Cinchona Plantation was first introduced in the Darjeeling Hills in 1850 but it was not till 1874 that a Quinine factory was established

in the Mungpoo hills which is thirty-five kilometres east of Darjeeling. After Indian Independence it was transferred to the Ministry of Trade and Commerce of Government of West Bengal, 27-50. See Sharma, 1997.

³² Article 3 of the Indian Constitution deals with the formation of new states and alteration of areas, boundaries or names of existing State. According to this Article, the Parliament, upon the recommendation of the President may:

- (a) form a new State by separation of territory from any State or by uniting two or more States or parts of States or by uniting any territory to a part of any State;
- (b) increase the area of any State;
- (c) diminish the area of any State;
- (d) alter the boundaries of any State;
- (e) alter the name of any State:

Source: http://www.legalserviceindia.com/constitution/const_india.htm (Accessed: 22/12/12).

³³ See Maharjan (2012) for a discussion on representations in the Nepalese media on the Prashant phenomenon.

³⁴ All India Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee defeated the Left government in the 2011 West Bengal General Elections. The CPI (M) had held power in the state for thirty-four years.

³⁵ The Limbus of Nepal call themselves Adivasi/janajatis and claim indigenous rights over eastern Nepal, in Sikkim the same ethnic group is spelt as Limboo, considered as one of the indigenous groups of Sikkim.

³⁶ According to the parity system, six seats were reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha community, six for the Nepalis and five for those nominated by the Chorsgyal. This ensured that the distribution of rewards and goods went in favour of the minority group in inverse relation to their numerical proportion. 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 category (BL) (see Kazi, 2009). This is an anomaly particular to Sikkim which is protected by Article 371F of the Indian Constitution³⁶ and thus in the Sikkim State Assembly there is reservation of seats for the BL community but not for ST, much to the frustration of other ST groups like Limboos' and Tamangs'.

³⁷ 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 (Das, 1983).

³⁸ In June 2014, the government issued orders that changed the status of Most Backward Classes (MBC) to OBC as their MBC status had not been accepted by the central government. At the time of writing these groups had simply been merged with other ethnic groups in the OBC category without any increase or change in the reservation scheme. Source: Sikkim Express, June 19, 2014.

³⁹ This system provided for directly elected village or town councils (Panchayats), their members forming an electoral college to choose district level representatives, who in turn selected from amongst themselves the majority of members of the national legislature or the Rashtriya Panchayat, the remainder being either representatives of government sponsored class organisations or royal nominees. And the system proclaimed to give impetus to local leadership and popular participation, advocated decentralisation of administrative authority and political responsibility (Lohani, 1973:26; Whelpton, 2005:101).

⁴⁰ *Janajati* is a term to denote a community which is outside the fold of the Hindu caste system, previously known as the Matwalis (Tamang, 2005:6 cited in Hangen, 2007:19)

⁴¹ Karnali is located in the mid-western development region of Nepal. It is one of the poorest and most remote regions of Nepal. According to local myth King Bali Hang was a Kirata king with an extensive kingdom from Pokhara to Gorkahpur (Vansittart in Chemjong, 2003: 143).

⁴² Politicisation is an attempt to define the ethnic group and the markers of membership to it, which can then be used for the mobilisation of peoples in support of deliberately cultivated values and of representing them to the world according to a consciously created image (Noonan, 2006; Dasgupta, 1999).

⁴³ Maila Limbu, agriculturist interviewed by the author on 3rd September, 2010, Yangnam VDC, Panchthar District, Nepal.

⁴⁴ Source: World Bank
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD/countries/NP-8S-XM?display=graph> (Accessed 20/10/2015).

⁴⁵ Source: UNDP <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/events/2014/july/HDR2014.html> (Accessed 20/10/2015).

⁴⁶ The Nepal Living Standards Survey uses 2,200 calorie consumption by a person a day and access to non-food items as the index to measure poverty. Thus, based on market prices in 2011, a person earning less than Rs.14,430 per year was deemed below the poverty line. Eastern Nepal has the lowest poverty level (21.44 percent) while western Nepal had the highest (46 percent).

Source: Kathmandu Post, 20/10/2011

<http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/10/20/money/third-nepal-living-standards-survey-25.16-percent-nepalis-below-poverty-line/227426.html> (Accessed: 17/11/2012).

⁴⁷ Source: The Economist
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/05/aid-and-corruption-nepal> (Accessed: 15/12/2012).

⁴⁸ Member of the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Student wing and a student at the Panchtar Multicampus. Interviewed by the author on 7th September, 2010, Phidim, Nepal.

⁴⁹ The upper caste Chettri and Bahuns are usually associated with features like high cheekbones and a sharp nose as compared to the adivasi/janajati, majority of who belong to the Mongoloid group and therefore have softer features-small eyes, flat noses.

⁵⁰ Newer, updated version of the Human Development Report was not available even at the time of writing.

⁵¹ 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 centre 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).

⁵² Rural poverty ratio is 19.66 per cent and urban poverty ratio is 15.21 per cent (HDR 2004:80). No new Human Development Report on Darjeeling District was available at the time of writing.

⁵³ Under Plantation Labour Act, 1950 the tea companies are supposed to provide a wide range of facilities to the labourers, ranging from health, education, ration etc. However, education, housing, ration, firewood all comprise a consolidated wage and therefore helps sustain the argument of low monetary wage in the tea estates For detailed description of the provisions under this Act, see <http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/policy/Plantations%20Labour%20Act%20amended.pdf>

⁵⁴ See Wagle, 2010 and Parajuli, 2006 for further discussion on these topics.

⁵⁵ As amended by The Plantations Labour (Amendment) Act 2010.

⁵⁶ Kalimpong sub-division is also promoted as one of the tourist destinations but apart from tourism small cottage industries like cheese, hand-made paper, floriculture, noodles etc provide means of subsistence thereby limiting the reliance on government employment, which offers only very limited opportunities.

⁵⁷ West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation was established in 1975 in order to streamline the tourism industry.

⁵⁸ Which then in turn causes tensions relating to the 'outsider, non-Sikkimese' status of the people coming in to work in the state.

⁵⁹ The State Socio-Economic Census 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 (SSEC, 2006:7).

⁶⁰ All figures are quoted from the SSEC 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.

⁶¹ According to the SSEC (2006:21) the highest number of BPL households are in the western district (26.54 percent), south (24.38 percent), north (18.65 percent) and east (13.45) percent.

⁶² 'Northeast Echoes', The Telegraph, 17/10/2011
http://www.telegraphindia.com/1111017/jsp/northeast/story_14623761.jsp (Accessed: 03/04/2012).

⁶³ GSDP refers to the market value of all final goods and services produced within a country or a state in a given period of time.

⁶⁴ Table 3. Distribution of workers by nature of activity

Activity	Number of Persons
Farmer	97714
Agricultural wage labourer	8365
Non-agricultural wage labourer	16851
Regular Salaried State Government	29603
Salaried Private Sector	11459
Business	12538
Self Employed	14934

Source: SSEC(2006: 182)

⁶⁵ Agriculturist, interviewed by the author on 12th November, 2010, Chumbung, West Sikkim.

⁶⁶ According to the SSEC, 2006, the following are the criteria for assessing BPL status of the people of Sikkim. Thus households **not** to be considered for BPL are:

Households having any member as government employees including work charge
Households having muster roll member with any other member employed in other sector or trades
Households having any member as government contractor of Class I and II
Households having any member who has an income over Rs.3000 per month
Households having Pucca structure
Households having paddy or cardamom or orchards or floriculture land of 2.5 acres or above
Households having barren or other lands over 5 acres
Households having agriculture/horticulture/animal husbandry production of more than Rs. 60,000 per year, having more than six cattle
Households having more than ten goats , sheep, yaks, buffalo, horses
Households having TV, fridge, washing machines, vacuum cleaner, microwave, geyser, generator, inverter, computer, DVD, VCD, oven, rice cooker camera, telephone, mobile
Households having more than one fan, more than one sofa, more than one almirah, more than two pressure cooker, more than one sewing machine
Households sending their children to private schools

⁶⁷ Government employee and resident of Hee Gaon, interviewed by the author on 14th November, 2010, West Sikkim.

⁶⁸ *Sikkim Express*, (05 Feb 2011).

⁶⁹ This Report titled, 'Strengthening Gram Panchayat- Planning and Budgeting in Sikkim' was prepared by the Indo-Swiss Mission to Sikkim with assistance from the Government of Sikkim.

⁷⁰ Source: *Sikkim Now!*, 26/06/2012.

⁷¹ In October 2010, the All Sikkim Educated Self-Employed Association submitted a memorandum to the state government urging them to start the 'purification process' of Sikkim Subject by which it meant to purge out those residents of Sikkim who held invalid or fake Sikkim Subject Certificates. Earlier in June, 31,180 individuals were reported as holding fake Sikkim Subject cards.
Source: *Sikkim Express*, 26/10/2010.

⁷² Source: *Zeenews.com*, 22/09/2010

http://zeenews.india.com/news/north-east/chamling-launches-project-to-make-sikkim-poverty-free_656876.html (Accessed: 10/11/2011).

⁷³ According to Notification no.103, 25/11/2003, issued by the Department of Personnel, Administrative Reforms and Training, different age limits were prescribed for different groups. While ST and SC were allowed age relaxation of five years, MBC and OBC groups were given a relaxation of four years. For example in an advertisement for the post of Under Secretary had different age bars as well as numbers of seats for the various socio-economic categories:

Category	Age	Number of seats	Percentage of population
ST(Limboo and Tamang)	35	4	15.92
SC	35	2	6.66
BL	35	5	20.86
MBC	34	5	23.46
OBC	34	5	23.20

Source: *Sikkim Express*, 22/10/2012; State Socio-Economic Census (2006:50).

⁷⁴ Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pI5fYUNs_Ck, (Accessed 21/20/2012).

⁷⁵ Pemble (2009: 371, 375) says, the Gurkha was neither invented nor discovered by the British, he was nevertheless an invention or a discovery of imperialism. He would not have existed without the Empire and by the time the British Empire in India came to an end the legend of the Gurkha was fully grown

⁷⁶ Interview conducted by the author on 20th January, 2011, Siliguri, West Bengal.

⁷⁷ In any conventional plantation, the government has the ultimate ownership of the land. According to the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act (1953), the government leases land for 30 years while collecting yearly tax and revenue. Under these terms and conditions, companies become the official owners of the land. The plantation workers have no control over plantation assets or participation in the decision making process. They are, as it were, part of the plantation assets that is sold or bought from one owner to the other (Tirkey, 2005:85).

⁷⁸ Construction of an ethnic identity directly related to the development of Nepali language, also known as *Khas Kura* or *Parbatiya*. See Onta, 1996; Chalmers, 2007.

⁷⁹ For example the undivided CPI submitted a memorandum in 1947 to Jawaharlal Nehru demanding *Gorkhasthan*- an independent nation comprising of the present day Nepal, Darjeeling district and Sikkim. (Subba, 1992: 90, 92). Also, see Ganguly, 2005.

⁸⁰ *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation* is a collection of I.B.Rai's most famous and loved stories translated in English edited by Anmole Prasad and Prem Poddar. The collection was released in 2009.

⁸¹ Interviewed by the author on 14th January, 2011, Banarhat, Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal

⁸² Bhaskar Golay, Nepali scholar, interview conducted by the author, 22nd January, 2011, Siliguri, West Bengal.

⁸³ Despite their earlier streak of success, the MNO has been losing ground steadily, unable to regain their position even in the contemporary era of ethnic politics. This can be attributed to the overall political atmosphere that was not conducive to ethnic politics as well as the generality of their agenda which was to unite all the 'Mongols' against the upper caste Hindus. The MNO was more successful in winning local rather than national elections, particularly in Ilam where in 1992 the MNO candidates won 24 out of 47 VDCs and won the majority of the posts including the chair and vice chairman. In 1997, MNO candidates were however elected in only 19 VDCs (Hangen, 2007: 182; 2010) and the number has declined steadily over the past years.

⁸⁴ Literal translation is wheat dance, usually danced during festivals, harvests and even fairs. Men and women hold hands and dance in a circle to the beat of the *chyabrun*, a drum used by Limbu men while the women sing the *palam*, songs describing stories of the harvest, life cycle etc.

⁸⁵ Group interview conducted by the author on 10th September, 2010, Chok Magu, Phidim, Nepal..

⁸⁶ Bairagi Kaila is the *non de plume* used by Til Bikram Nembang who was born in Panchtar District in 1940. An eminent Limbu poet and scholar, Bairagi Kaila was educated in Darjeeling and is famous in Nepali literary world for his collaborative work with Ishwor Ballav and Indra Bahadur Rai known as the *Tesro Ayam* (Third Dimension) movement in 1963. In 1974 he published a collection of his poems titled *Bairagi Kaila ka Kavataharu* (Poems of Bairagi Kaila). Bairagi Kaila was interviewed by the author on 25th September 2010, Kathmandu, Nepal.

⁸⁷ The Seven Party Alliance comprised of the Nepali Congress, Nepali Congress (Democratic), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), Nepal Workers and Peasant Party, Nepal Goodwill Party, United Left Front and the People's Front.

⁸⁸ While the fieldwork was limited to just the eastern hills and the adivasi/janajati groups in particular, it is quite probable that this is a common sentiment felt across the country. As Kanak Mani Dixit (2011) writes, 'what rankles the people is not so much that yet another constitution-writing deadline has lapsed, but the seemingly never-ending shortages of power, fuel, water, jobs, food and even passport.

Source: [http://www.ccd.org.np/resources/wcms_100897\[1\].pdf](http://www.ccd.org.np/resources/wcms_100897[1].pdf) (Accessed: 22/12/2012). The 2012 annual survey conducted by Himal Magazine expands on these themes of inefficiency, corruption further. (Source: http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/nepalitimes/pdf/Nepali_Times_604.pdf).

⁸⁹ This speech was given on 24th July, 2010 in a public forum to celebrate World Indigenous Day amidst members of other ethnic groups who were also dressed in their ethnic attire. The author was a participant observant on this present occasion.

⁹⁰ The state-led cultural assimilation projects after the Second World War and de-colonisation of states encouraged and supported by the UN, specifically the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Article 2.9 of Convention 107, 1957) gave rise to the Indigenous Peoples Movement in the early 1970s (Cowan et al, 2001). An important achievement of this movement was the revised declaration of the 1989 ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which recognized their cultural distinctiveness from national communities.

⁹¹ Yumaism is a Henotheist or Kathenotheist religion which believes in only a single goddesses Tagera Ningwaphuma, the creator, preserver and sustainer of life. Yumaism believes in the 'biogenesis theory of life' wherein life is created only through life with the blessing of the goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma (Yuma). The mortal human beings have to survive with the judicious use of all living and non-living objects that were created for his survival (Subba, 2011:150-51).

⁹² Dorjee (2012:63) points that oral tradition and the inconsistent tradition of recording history has led to the complete reliance on colonial records for authentic, unbiased sources of history. He suggests a fresh enquiry of the accounts because 'incomplete and unexplained perceptions of how things continue to influence decisions that impact the social life of communities to this day....While some communities might not have received universal recognition as 'Sikkimese', others have begun to believe the stereotypical colonial depictions painted about them.' This critical stance and interrogation of common identities is especially important especially now when colonial stereotypes regarding race and ethnicity have found more political favour.

⁹³ For example, a comparison of the manifestoes of the SDF and Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee prior to the 1999 General Elections shows that the primary agenda of the leading parties was reservation of seats for Nepalis, Tsongs and Sherpas in the State Assembly, inclusion of Chettri, Bahuns and Newar in the OBC category, inclusion of various MBC groups in the ST list and protection of Revenue Order No. 1

⁹⁴ In June 2014, the government issued orders that changed the status of Most Backward Classes (MBC) to OBC as their MBC status had not been accepted by the central government. At the time of writing these groups had simply been merged with other ethnic groups in the OBC category without any increase or change in the reservation scheme. Source: Sikkim Express, June 19, 2014.

⁹⁵ The 'left out' ethnic groups are (Rai, Newar, Mangar, Dewan, Sunuwar-Mukhia, Bhujel, Jogi-Sanyasi, Chettri-Bahuns/Khas, Gurung, Thami and Newar). *Sikkim NOW!*, (02 Feb, 2014).

⁹⁶ Akhil Bhujel Sangha of Sikkim (United Bhujel Association of Sikkim), *Ethnography of Bhujel Hill Tribe*, n.d, Introduction.

⁹⁷ These aspects will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

⁹⁸ The *daura-suruwal* and *chaubandi cholo* of the Gorkha is on permanent display on two statues atop Gorkha Ranchmanch Bhavan, Darjeeling, where other emblems like the *khukuri*, Gorkha soldier etc are displayed amidst the statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, who is flanked by mermaids on two sides.

⁹⁹ Refusal to wear the dress resulted in their faces being blackened by GJM activists.
Source: The Telegraph, 15th September, 2008
http://www.telegraphindia.com/1081015/jsp/siliguri/story_9968368.jsp

¹⁰⁰ Bangla Bhasa Bachao Committee claims to be an apolitical social organization based in Siliguri, in the foothills of Darjeeling District. They are opposed to the formation of Gorkhaland. Their primary claim being that Nepalis living in the Darjeeling District are not Indian nationals and that Darjeeling was 'a predominant (sic) Bengali town even at the time of Independence'.
Source: Official blog of the Bangla Bhasa Society
<http://banglabanchao.wordpress.com/page/14/> (Accessed: 07/01/2013).

¹⁰¹ One of the most important poets to have emerged from Nepali literary scene is Agam Singh Giri who in his last poem *Yuddha ra Yoddha* (War and Warrior), describes the Nepali as a martial but maligned race. A part of his poem as reproduced in Indra Bahadur Rai's essay on Indian Nepal Nationalism (1994:179-80) expresses Giri's feeling towards the label of 'mercenaries' and the unjust treatment of Nepalis in India:

*'O warrior
Your son is yet to be born ,
He shall be then a part of your life,
Allow him not to be wounded
Spilling blood for others;
Forbid him to sharpen his khukuri
To fight other men's battles,
To add shine to others' existence;
History will only brand him a murderer,
Let him not be accursed by all
Or consigned to insults and injuries.
We are in the midst of a war.
We have fought and have somehow survived.
There is a cry for fear in our heart.
War, not understood,
Is starkly visible in our eyes.'*

¹⁰² Lovism or Premvad is a religious cult in Nepal started by Bhakta Kumar Rai. He is known as Supreme Master God Angel to his followers spread across the world. They consider him to be an angel sent by God to propagate peace, love and follow the 'Heavenly Path'. He is extremely popular amongst the Rai ethnic group in the eastern Himalaya. According to Master Godangel, 'for peace there is only one ultimate and unconditionally vital medicine that is sincere love'. Source: <http://mastergodangel.com/introduction/lovism/> (accessed: 20/05/2015).

¹⁰³ For example, according to the ethnographic reports and memorandum submitted to the Burman Commission in 2008 those ethnic groups (Rai, Gurung, Sunuwar, Thami, Dewan, and Bhujel) who were aspiring for the ST status had to answer specific questions pertaining to specific ethnic language and dialect.

¹⁰⁴ Like the Limboos, the Rai ethnic group is also based on an oral transmission of knowledge and therefore lack any previously known script. The AKRS therefore adopted a script which had been derived from the Kirat script, and is very similar to the Limboo script (Rai, 2008:48).

¹⁰⁵ Source: Sikkim Express, 18/08/2012

http://www.sikkimexpress.com/archives/19%20July/page_2.jpg (Accessed 23/07/2012).

¹⁰⁶ Member of the Mukhia Association, Sikkim, interviewed by the author on 13th Dec, 2010, Gangtok, Sikkim. This point was also reiterated by a member of the Bhujel Association, interviewed by the author on 10th November, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ A Mundhum consists of legends, folklores, pre-historic accounts, sermons and moral or philosophical exhortations in poetic language (Edingo, 2007: 165). For detailed description and accounts of the use of the Mundhum in the lives of the Limbus see Sagant (1996).

¹⁰⁸ Executive member of the KYC, Central Committee, interviewed by the author on 22th September, 2010, Kathmandu, Nepal.

¹⁰⁹ Pradeep Limbu, executive member of the KYC, Ilam chapter, interviewed by the author on 3rd September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

¹¹⁰ During specific days of Tihar/Diwali, men and women go around in groups to different houses singing songs of celebration. Men sing the *deusi* and *bhailo* is sung by women. In both these songs, the singers sing that they have come on the command of King Balihang (*Bali Maharaj ko hukum le garda*). The story and relevance of Kirat history and culture on that of other groups of the eastern Himalaya remains yet to be explored.

¹¹¹ This party split into numerous other factions and Chumlung has been at the forefront in providing a common platform to these parties.

¹¹² This was also a strategy that was seen in the recent Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling where all vehicles had to change their number plates from West Bengal (WB) to Gorkhaland (GL). This act may be deemed as a display of territorial authority and a challenge to the state.

¹¹³ Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2011) ranks countries/territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. Their country/territory's score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0-10, where 0 means that a country is perceived as highly corrupt and 10 means that a country is perceived as very clean. According to this index, India scored 3.1 and is ranked 95 and Nepal scored 2.2, ranking 154 out of the 182 countries in which it conducted the survey.

Source: Transparency International

<http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/> (Accessed: 09/10/2012).

¹¹⁴ The Chief Minister of Sikkim gave a statement in July 2012 saying, 'Government job is service to people. If any government employee wants to politics (sic) then they are free to resign from government service. I will approve the resignation without any delay'. Government officials cannot hold any political affiliation or be actively involved in any activity deemed political, which in this context was attending a picnic party organised by the opposition party.

Source: Sikkim Express, 19th July, 2012

¹¹⁵ Kanchan Chandra's (2000) study on the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a caste based political party in the Indian heartland of Uttar Pradesh is an excellent example of POS. In this case study the external decline of the Congress party, the 'representational blockage' of the low castes within the Congress party itself and the increase in an educated, articulate class who then sought alternate forms of political representation is linked to the rise of the BSP as well as Dalit politics in India.

¹¹⁶ According to Bourdieu (2005: 30), a 'field' may be defined as a 'field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, their position taking being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive to the field...the concept of the 'field' is a research tool, the main aim of which is to enable the scientific construction of social objects'.