

Townsend Middleton. 2016. *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

The Demands of Recognition seeks to understand the impact anthropological knowledge production had in the context of tribal identity in post-colonial India. Middleton's analysis of the tribal recognition process shows how

the colonial legacy continues to shape the post-colonial “ethnographic knowledge structure” in various ethnic and tribal classificatory schemes in India, particularly in Darjeeling today. The author highlights how the series of events in Darjeeling particularly advocating one’s indigenous identity by the different communities there demonstrating their “primitive traits” (p. 115) has become a usual reality in that region. The Nepali community and especially the one that participated in the earlier Gorkhaland Movement, Middleton argues, having been unsuccessful in building a pan-Nepali autonomous identity, has since sought to categorize itself as a Scheduled Tribe.

Middleton informs us about the hopes and despair of the tribe aspiring communities and its link with the larger issues like the future of the whole Nepali community in the context of the politics of regional autonomy mooted by provisions like the Sixth Schedule in the Constitution of India. The anxiety of the Indian-Nepalis, according to Middleton, basically erupts not from the lack of their identity as an Indian but the non-recognition of the same by the wider society. He argues that the Gorkhaland Movement of eighties changed its color/face from the beginning of the nineties. Now the Nepalis in order to be identified with the Indian nation opted “tribalism” as the most appropriate strategy. In whatever form it may be either as a “Gorkha” or a “tribe” the Darjeeling Nepalis’ prime concern is to be identified within the Indian state and as its rightful citizens. Middleton grasped the inner workings of the post-colonial state and how the life of the communities of Darjeeling has been affected by it. He pinpoints how the colonial roots of anthropology as a discipline still continue to haunt the present ethnological knowledge structure used for governing diversities. Today the ethnos have started to embrace the strategy used by the government upon them by trying to adjust within it by redefining themselves.

The mobilization of the minorities and their uprising in the late liberalization era and the stagnant criteria of tribal recognition maintained by the state in India in fact seem as an unending problem both for the communities as also for the post-colonial states. Middleton places his critique upon the entire process (of tribal recognition) and considers the system as binding upon the people, having no choice but to operate within it. Here his application of the term such as “ethno-contemporary” (p. 18) implying the extent of how the present has been captivated around the ethnos and its affect, appropriately describes the “tribal situation” of the Darjeeling region.

Middleton explores the persistent marginalization of the Indian Nepalis (Gorkhas) in the Indian national imagination. Their designations as “foreigners” or “outsiders” often relegate them to a second-class status in the Indian nation. As several efforts by the Nepalis to acquire a homeland and an equal citizenship were met with rejection, they turned to “tribal identity” to demand social justice from the Indian state. He adds that the concept of tribe and its distinctiveness from caste evolved over time and explains how this has impacted the process of identity formation in the Darjeeling hills. Since the colonial time, discourse and classification around the term tribe have been contested. However, lately, tribal identity has been defined as “pure, unaffected by any external forces” (p. 96). Such ahistorical approach to identity has led to more controversies over the tribe-caste dichotomy.

Middleton pursues and highlights the role the “Hindu-centric imaginary” (p. 84) has played in the propagation of such ideas. Tribes, under this formulation, were understood as “yet to be developed/modernized” (p. 88). While vulnerability and uniqueness were used to measure a tribal identity, the Indian government sought assimilation and protection of tribes as other qualifications. But the Lokur committee (1965) thwarted the whole process and presented tribal life to be a stagnant category unaffected by the forces of socio-economic changes. It demanded an untainted purity of the tribal culture, incompatible with the reality of the contemporary world. In the context of the communities of Darjeeling, whose history is shaped by migration and hybridity, people seeking to claim a tribal identity find it nearly impossible to meet these criteria. Middleton shows how the contemporary subject population of Darjeeling equally became the participants of the state defined categorization wherein the subjects started to remake their politics to suit their life-world. Tribal recognition which demands certain criteria to be fulfilled drive the communities there to advertise their respective culture and tradition under the active guidance of cultural experts and community leaders. Thus, contrary to the popular expectation of subject population being submissive (passive) to the demands of the state they are rather showing their lively engagement with the ethnological knowledge formation.

Middleton narrates how in actual practice tribal recognition process is operationalized and what role the state anthropologists have to play in it and what implications such practices may yield in delivering social justice to the incumbents. He explores the encounter between the anthropologists and the aspiring tribes to shed light on the politics and practices of identity recognition

in India. Middleton argues that the state anthropologists generally consider Nepali identity with contempt for their intermixture and the lack of purity. The hierarchy of position among the anthropologists with their respective stand about anthropology at different level of tribal recognition as a system often enters while delivering the judgment. At the end the prejudice which the state bureaucrats have for the Nepali community often shapes their decision thus justice for the communities get entangled in a bureaucratic structure. Hence the complicated nature and process of classifying and defining a group as tribal is fraught with political, bureaucratic and intellectual tensions. At the same time, Middleton illustrates how the bureaucratic power guided by the logic of “politics of difference” also obscures the voice of the anthropologists. He calls this the unavoidable power of the “ethnographic state” (p. 139). His elaboration of the facts, processes and their implications offers a clear understanding as to how in the estimation of the state the project of tribal difference and identification is measured, calculated, and decided upon and how social justice is governed and delivered in India.

He examines how the development of new consciousness amongst the tribal groups leads to a tribal rebirth. Middleton sees such transformations beyond the lens of opportunism and borrows the term “politics beyond recognition” (from Sara Shneiderman), to describe them. Besides seeking recognition, the aspiring tribes of Darjeeling, Middleton opines, were transforming their subjectivities. The transformation of the population of Darjeeling into a “tribal being” at present has altogether complicated their position whereby the historicity of Nepalis’ exchange of the caste and tribal traits justifies their state of cultural hybridity. The intermingling of caste and tribal features of Indian Nepalis and the inseparable acculturation of both the traits today has created a hindrance for those tribal claimant groups who now want to cast off from their history of hybridity by proclaiming themselves as “authentic tribe” without any caste Hindu influences. The Nepali language and culture having a Hindu root any attempt by the tribal claimant group to isolate from it will complicate their Nepali identity. Since the term Nepali corresponds more with caste Hindu features, although it cannot be denied that the historical formation of Nepali nationalism in Darjeeling is altogether different.

The book also deals with the struggle of the marginalized communities and their incessant attempts to find a dignified political space in India. Middleton ends up with a thought provoking proposal about the disciplinary

intermingling of anthropology and ethnology and a need to bring about a humanitarian base for a new kind of anthropological exploration that transcends the foundations of colonial taxonomies. The anthropological future he thinks should be “to understand and to exist” (p. 222) serving the interest of all, and a long journey that claims to surpass the “institutional scholarly” engagements.

Middleton’s argument that the earlier movement for a Gorkha identity has been replaced by a call for tribal identity reduces the complexity of issues surrounding the politics of Nepali identity formation and lived experiences in India. After the so-called movement for tribal identity began in Darjeeling, the incidents of intercommunity clashes over community issues/relations are uncommon. Moreover, community organizations are there with all their instructions like intra-community marriages, non celebration of Hindu festivals but no single community association is seen challenging the other’s authenticity thus tribal uprising in Darjeeling hills has never become a matter of contention among the communities there. Race and competition for passing through the tribal test gained prominence among the different hill communities but it certainly did not extend to the degree of proclaiming the other’s culture as inauthentic, corrupt and impure. Process of authenticating one’s culture in no way implies a process of demeaning the others. Tribalism in Darjeeling can in no way be seen as an alternative to the Gorkhaland Movement since the demand for tribal status may have its temporal existence but “Gorkhaland” and the identity issues of the Gorkhas/Nepalis have long-term salience. Gorkha’s anxiety should not be mixed with “tribal experience” of the communities as both are different in terms of feeling and intensity but equally powerful.

Middleton’s claim that the “tribal identification” was an alien concept for the Nepalis deserves to be commented. Although the showing off of the “tribal traits” by the community organizations in front of the state anthropologists was more strategic than spontaneous, what were demonstrated are in practice in case of some communities who maintain them at their households or community level marking their continuity with the tradition. They failed to realize that these are the traits that differentiate them from the other and that these can fetch them the benefits of protective discrimination measures. Later the realization of the same fact has led the educated ones among them to mobilize their respective communities for the preservation of the same. Thus the Indian system which only “identifies” tribes and does not provide

a “definition” of them might have led them to project their mundane cultural reality as strategically essential. Thus the mobilization of the communities which started with the preservation of their already existing language and scripts otherwise may have appeared as an “invention of tradition.” Besides these little debatable aspects *The Demands of Recognition* promises to be one of the groundbreaking works that have scrutinized the problems and prospects of doing anthropology in post-colonial time. Best is its attempt to unfurl the processes through which the know-and-rule paradigm of colonial anthropology gets redefined to suit the politics of recognition and the requirements of social justice in a neo-liberal state like India. As such it is a valuable contribution to the field of South Asian studies.

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