

Constructing Democracy: Ethnicity and Politics in the Eastern Himalaya

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Ethnic identity continues to remain a central feature of state formation in the eastern Himalaya. The malleability of ethnic identity, 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 across the region. This process represents the dynamism inherent in ethnic groups to respond to changing political and economic structures and the transformation of ethnic identity into an important political resource. The persistence and prolific ubiquity of ethnic politics leads to questions of its co-existence with democracy- a modern, political institution that has no room for ethnic exclusivity. In the eastern Himalaya, democracy exists and thrives alongside ethnic politics; both facilitate and legitimise the existence of the other. While ethnic identity is a crucial base for collective political action, ethnic politics is enacted within a framework that prescribes to democratic norms of mobilisation, participation and most importantly, the mandate of the majority. Situating ethnic politics within a democratic structure, the paper focuses on contemporary Nepali politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal, to discuss how this fusion of new political system and ethnic identity has led to local and regional interpretations of democracy, made democracy more inclusive and facilitated peoples' politics in the eastern Himalaya.