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Review of *Democratisation in the Himalayas: Interests, Conflicts, and Negotiations* by Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram

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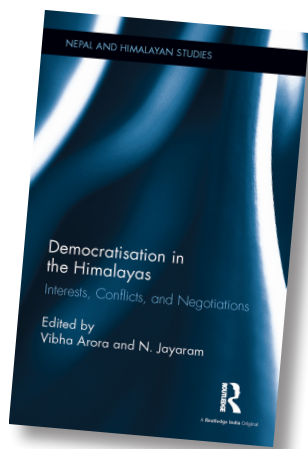
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**Democratisation in the Himalayas:
Interests, Conflicts, and
Negotiations.**

Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. 209 pages. ISBN 9781138244283.

Reviewed by Nilamber Chhetri

The Himalayan region has stirred academic and scholarly debates over a range of topics. Contributing to these debates, *Democratisation in the Himalayas: Interests, Conflicts, and Negotiations* explores the contentious and conscientious

practices of democracy shaped by ethnicity, interests groups, and social movements. The different chapters in the book provide detailed ethnographic insights and an erudite analysis on people and their experiences with local systems of governance and wider democratic practices. From piecemeal movements to violent ethnic strife, the volume captures the myriad ways in which people respond to state structures.

The book is divided into three sections. Part One explore issues of identities and belongingness, Part Two deals with how multiple groups and communities negotiate democratic and electoral processes, and Part Three details issues of ethnic nationalism, gendered experiences of displacement, and demands for a homeland.

In the first chapter, Subhadra Mitra Channa explores the formation and negotiations of identity by the Jad Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi. Identified as cross-border traders who settled in India, the case of the Jad is an interesting ethnographic read. Channa notes their association with Tibetan Buddhism and their self-identification as *pahari* Hindus of Rajput descent, which at times conflicts with their classification as a scheduled tribe in official registers. Channa sees this process of identification with the Hindu system as a tacit strategy adopted by the community to improve their social standing within the local *pahari* community. Noting the presence of multiple identities amongst the Jad, she writes, “they are yet to even decide what identity they want for themselves, as the most coveted identity of being an upper-caste Hindu Rajput is at variance with their perceived advantageous identity as being a tribe” (p. 48).

In the second chapter, Debojyoti Das traverses a well-trodden path to unravel the impact of the census operation on group identity in South Asia. He shows how census enumeration has resulted in conflicting claims for the status of backward tribes in Nagaland. By exploring the controversy surrounding the 2001 census report in Nagaland, he presents an astute picture of polarization within Naga society. Das notes how the highest decadal population growth in the 2001 census sent an alarm amongst seventeen major recognized sub-tribes in Nagaland, as it meant they had to share resources with the newly recognized sub-tribes in the state. Based on ethnographic insights, Das testifies to the fact that village heads had inflated the numbers of households, thus leading to local manipulations of the population with a tacit aim to garner more developmental funds. Looking at this condition, Das writes, “the provision of affirmative action is taking place within an already recognized scheduled tribe status. Hence, reservation aims to create new categories within the already-existing categorization” (p. 70).

The aspect of affective belonging to the region and assertion of subaltern identity is explored by Vibha Arora in Chapter Three through her analysis of the Lepcha community in Sikkim and Kalimpong. She documents the varied ways in which Lepchas have resisted the hegemonic power of the post-colonial Indian state. She observes the differentiation between Lepchas and shows how their respective locations have affected their varied subject position in political processes. Considering all such transformations, Arora notes the ways in which Lepchas are transforming themselves as subaltern subjects by engaging in democratic practices and are

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refurbishing their identities as primitive and indigenous groups with an environmental consciousness.

The second section of the volume opens with Swargajyoti Gohain's essay, which explores the role of Buddhist monks in electoral politics in Arunachal Pradesh and notes how their involvement in the political processes is structured by their quest to preserve their monastic authority. Gohain highlights the crucial role played by monks in demanding the formation of Mon Autonomous Region in 2003. Highlighting this aspect, she writes, "participation in electoral practices thus becomes a means of achieving pragmatic benefits or returns for the monastic communities" (p. 127). According to Gohain, such involvement of monks represents a deeper quest to preserve their monastic authority and avoid progressive marginalization from society.

Amanda Snellinger, in her essay, focuses on student politics in Nepal and highlights their intrinsic connection to mainstream political parties. The chapter seeks to unravel the different conceptions of democracy unfolding in Nepal. She specifically examines Nepali student organizations and their quest to engage with pervasive conceptions of democracy. In this regard, Snellinger regards students' politics as a "mini-public" that represents the changing facets of politics in the country (p. 137).

The third section of the book discusses issues of ethnic nationalism, demands for a homeland, gender, and displacement in the Himalayan region. Vibha Arora and Ngamjahoo Kipgen look at Kuki nationalism and the demand for a Kuki homeland in Manipur. The authors consider such demands as a consequence of territorial and ethnic competitions over resources. They argue that Kukis' claims over the lands in Manipur are based on their territorial affiliations and shared experience of history and cultural memory that shape their notions of belongingness. Highlighting the cases of violence perpetuated in the region, the authors pin their hopes for an amicable solution in democratic ideals and processes.

In the final essay in the volume, Charu Sawhney and Nilika Mehrotra focus on displaced Kashmiri Hindus and note the importance of social and cultural capital in new settings. Following the narrative method, they seek to understand the gendered experiences of violence, displacement, and resettlement faced by displaced Kashmiris. Significantly, Sawhney and Mehrotra highlight how constraints and opportunities offered by new settlements compel men and women to adopt different strategies, which in turn redefine their traditional roles and responsibilities.

This edited volume is of immense value to scholars and researchers working on South Asia in general and the Himalayan region in particular.

Taken together, the essays provide rich ethnographic insights into different groups' engagement with the state and democratic institutions in the Himalayan region. The book could have further explored developments such as the formation of autonomous hill councils that have deepened democratic ideals while at the same time also instigated popular mobilizations. Additionally, a chapter on the environment and the impact of natural calamities on the social and cultural life of the people in the region could have added fervor to the arguments presented in the book. Further, issues associated with resource extraction and the development of infrastructure in the Himalayan region could have been highlighted to provide a deeper analysis of regional mobility patterns. Despite these shortcomings, the book highlights some of the major issues central to the Himalayan region. It especially provides insights on identity formation and its entanglement with bureaucratic processes, which will be indispensable for researchers and scholars working on the region.

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