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The demands of recognition: state anthropology and ethnopolitics in Darjeeling

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BOOK REVIEW

The demands of recognition: state anthropology and ethnopolitics in Darjeeling, by Townsend Middleton, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016, xx + 278 pp., US$ 25.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8047-9542-5

Townsend Middleton's *The Demands of Recognition* is an invitation to think through the everyday dilemmas of ethnic minorities as well as the state anthropologists who certify them as 'scheduled tribes' in contemporary India. Through an extended case study of Nepali-speaking groups that are collectively known as 'Gorkhas', Middleton shows how late liberal governmentality and what he calls the 'ethno-contemporary' make and remake each other. As the postcolonial state has devised affirmative-action policies to redress the historical disadvantages of socially marginalized groups, a new kind of 'ethno-politics' has emerged to claim the loaves and fishes offered by the state. In turn, this new ethnopolitics has compelled the state to rethink its classificatory schemas and mechanisms in order to decide which groups ought to be considered 'tribes' and, hence, merit affirmative action. In most cases, the primary aim of ethnopolitics in contemporary India is to enter official lists or 'schedules' that record castes and tribes as well as other groups deemed to be 'backward' enough to warrant affirmative action. The situation with the Gorkhas was no different after their demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland went unmet a generation ago. By undertaking a fine-grained ethnographic exploration of the Gorkhas' ethnopolitics and the travails of their interlocutors within the postcolonial ethnographic state, Middleton challenges us to interrogate our received notions of ethnicity and about the place of anthropology in our world.

The genealogies of the 'ethno-contemporary', I suggest, need to be unpacked. Middleton uses the term to describe the 'ethnologically affected present' (18) or a time in which categories drawn from colonial ethnographic knowledge, e.g. 'tribe', become popular and bureaucratic commonsense today. If ethnology makes the present, however, then we must ask: 'Who makes ethnology?' In response, Middleton offers a historical sketch dating back to the travel writings and administrative reports of Brian Hodgson, an East India Company official who lived and worked extensively in Nepal and the neighboring Darjeeling hills during the early nineteenth century. Thereafter, he moves on to the writings of later anthropologist-administrators such as Dalton, Hunter and Risley. These men were the pioneers of 'tribal' anthropology in India. Since the 1980s, however, postcolonial historians have treated them as villainous fabricators of such spurious social identities as caste, tribe and religion. Middleton wisely avoids such a sweeping judgment. To him, 'epistemic discontent' and 'anxiety' (69) rather than any spirit of mischief on the part of colonial administrators led them to come up with ethnological labels to separate 'tribal' groups from 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. These labels were always seen as unsatisfactory, as Fuller (2016) has recently argued, because they did not fit the messy empirical realities on the ground. Colonial censuses after 1911 reflected the growing unease with these older labels, and, as Fuller explains, they began to take more seriously Indians' own conceptions of their and others' identities. In other words, for Fuller, colonial anthropologists were increasingly compelled to reckon with the subjectivities of Indian subjects as the final word on ethnological differences. Middleton arrives independently at more or less the same conclusion as Fuller. Both represent a turn away from earlier caricatures of the

colonial state and its workings that enjoy canonical status within South Asian studies. Yet insofar as the dialectics between official anthropologists and their ethnological subjects lie at the heart of this book, Middleton misses an opportunity to delve deeper into the conversations and collaborations that produced colonial ethnological monographs and census reports. Might those conversations and collaborations hold the key to grasping the genealogies of the 'ethno-contemporary' in modern India? At stake is a reappraisal of how and by whom colonial knowledge was actually produced as part of a 'deeper, more historical reading of the ethno-contemporary' (186). I have shown elsewhere, for instance, that the ethnological endeavors of Dalton and Hunter are best viewed alongside the politics of forest-dwelling cultivators who wished to identify themselves as 'tribal' or 'aboriginal' groups in order to make originary claims to land in Chotanagpur (Chandra 2016). Similarly, Sen (2016) has shown how the political agency of Dalit census enumerators has been erased, wittingly or not, by crude Foucauldian readings of colonial classificatory and counting practices. We must, therefore, rethink who really made colonial ethnology and under what circumstances. Beyond administrative anxieties, ethnopolitics since the nineteenth century must be taken seriously as a precursor to the ethno-contemporary.

Once we begin to appreciate that ethnopolitics today emerges out of earlier negotiations between 'tribal' subjects and the modern state, the performances and maneuvers of 'indigeneity' that we observe during fieldwork seem less bewildering. The 'absolute alterity' that treats 'Hindus' and 'tribes' as ontologically separate, if not opposed, categories (103) appears less a colonial imposition than a legacy of earlier ethnopolitical practices. The subaltern agency that underwrote colonial law and governance thus comes to the fore. We can no longer simply assume that 'tribal' groups are 'animists' invested in 'keeping the state away' (Shah 2007). On the contrary, as Middleton shows brilliantly in chapter 2, 'animism' is central to defining 'tribes' in India, and the calculated act of worshipping a rock as opposed to the Goddess Durga speaks directly to this official definition. This is at once a performance targeting postcolonial representatives of the ethnographic state and an attempt to remold the internally divided Gorkha community in a new 'tribal' idiom. But Gorkhas are not necessarily obliged to follow what their leaders tell them to do. This is why the policing of ethnic boundaries by men such as Ram Bahadur Koli come to the fore. Koli, the executive officer of Darjeeling's Department of Information and Cultural Affairs (DICA) whom we encounter in chapter 3, was later a key force behind local efforts to present Darjeeling as a 'tribal' place. Middleton calls him an 'ethnopolitical operative' who sought to 'coordinate the various bodies of civil society into a unified tribal whole' (85). Koli's experience within the local administration clearly shaped his political activism. Yet Middleton's evocative ethnography points to the limits of such activism when it lacks mass support even as it points to the necessity of conjoining negotiations with the state with negotiations within ethnic communities. Without these two sets of negotiation taking place simultaneously, ethnopolitics flounders under leaders without followers.

Even when tensions between these two kinds of negotiations inside and outside the community are provisionally resolved, claims for recognition may remain unmet. As representatives of the West Bengal government's Cultural Research Institute (CRI) arrived in Darjeeling to adjudicate claims to 'tribal' status in 2006, a distinctive ethnopolitics greeted them. Activists produced memos that drew on colonial and postcolonial ethnographical and census data to claim 'tribal' or ST status. These memos reposed their faith in the liberal ideals of the modern Indian state to make legitimate claims on it (108–09). The memos, of course, emerged out of extensive planning and preparation on how best to present oneself before the CRI ethnologists. Both performers and spectators knew their

parts well. Model village communities had been set up in advance for the show. They were alert to the five official criteria that ethnic groups had to meet to be recognized as 'tribal', namely, 'primitive traits', 'distinctive culture', 'geographical isolation', 'shyness of contact' with outsiders and 'backwardness' (115). They were also careful to avoid using Nepali as an identity because it was located officially outside the postcolonial Indian geo-body (114). As one of Middleton's interlocutors noted, the peculiar modernity of Gorkha ethnopolitical claims on the Indian state lay in its ironic 'primitive' and 'backward' postures (119). The CRI ethnologists were not blind to the irony on display either. They understood that performances were staged for their benefit. 'Nothing was raw; everything was cooked', as one of them later told Middleton (124). In reality, what existed was the hybrid modernity of Gorkha ethnopolitics, but both community leaders and official ethnologists knew that it would not suffice. Both were 'advocates' of marginalized communities (134), but modernity meant insincerity in the ethnologists' eyes and a loss of innocence or purity in the leaders' minds. In postcolonial India today, neither impassioned performances of marginality nor sympathetic officials suffice for 'tribal' recognition. Although Middleton does not say so, the conversations and collaborations that once made the ethno-contemporary possible have long been relegated by a Hindu majoritarian postcolonial state to the dustbin of history. We are left, therefore, with divided ethnic minorities and a strategic turn to violence as a last resort to negotiate modern state power from below.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize the richness and depth of Middleton's ethnography of recent Gorkha ethnopolitics. Such careful, sympathetic assessments of subaltern politics are rare in India, though elite posturing in the name of the subaltern abounds. In making the case for a 'deeper, more historical reading of the ethno-contemporary', Middleton and I share much common ground. Reappraisals of the colonial past, I believe, are vital to recover alternative forms of political praxis in contemporary India and beyond. The role of anthropology and history in this process of recovery, however, remains unclear. Should anthropologists and historians simply protect and endorse their activist informants? Or can they become willing collaborators in producing new forms of activist knowledge? Middleton's ethnography points, above all, to the limits of demanding recognition as 'tribes' today. Other ways of negotiating a Hindu majoritarian state, whether violent or peaceful, may prove more effective. In India today, we thus find some ethnic minorities taking up arms, whether as Gorkha, Maoist or Naga rebels, even as others in western and central India seek recognition and social mobility within the Hindu majoritarian fold. The Indian experience may, accordingly, point to the real limits of 'indigeneity' and 'late liberalism' as global analytics. As long as the nation-state remains the only or primary game in town, subaltern politics has little choice except to negotiate it on its own ethno-turf.

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