

Book Review

ETHNIC INEQUALITY IN THE NORTHEASTERN INDIAN BORDERLANDS: SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE. By Anita Lama. pp. xi+188, index, bibliography, 2020. Routledge (Tylor & Francis Books India Pvt. Ltd.): New Delhi. Hard cover. Price ₹ 788/-

This book has attempted to explore the relationship between ethnicity, inequalities and symbolic violence with the issues of unequal integration of little ethnic groups into state structure in the north-eastern borderlands of India. This book is based on Anita Lama's doctoral monograph submitted at the Global and Area Studies at Humboldt University, Germany, where she has taken the Limbu tribe/ethnic group of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal as an area of her field study.

Lama in her book applied the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notions 'theory of symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, P. 1998. *Practical Reasons: On the Theory of Action*. Poity Press: Cambridge) to understand and interpret the issues of Limbu's subjugation in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal as a consequence of the state structure, dominant culture and pattern of ethnicization in different historical phases. While using the term 'symbolic violence' how Bourdieu stresses the dominant acceptance as legitimate their condition of domination (Bourdieu, P. and Loic J. D. Wacquant 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, p.167. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago). Similarly, she emphasizes that the Limbus in Sikkim and Darjeeling were earlier categorized under 'the Nepali group' and later as 'Scheduled Tribe' of Nepali origin under the Indian Constitution, while on the contrary in Nepal they were included under the 'Kirati or Matwali' group, which have arguably accepted the domination through legitimization ((Subba, T. B. 1997. *Politics of Culture: A Study of Three Kirati Communities in Eastern Himalayas*. Orient Longman: Chennai).

The author argued that this layer of categorization made by the dominant group is a *South Asian Anthropologist*, 2022, 22(1): 79-81

'misrecognition and misconception' in the case of Limbus which is directly accompanied by symbolic power. For example, the Limbus in Sikkim and Darjeeling may misinterpret the Scheduled Tribe status as implying indigeneity and legitimacy, while the dominant group may link them with Hinduization of tribal communities of Nepali origin. Similarly, in Nepal, Limbus may identify their 'Kirati' identity with indigeneity and legitimacy, while the dominant may associate it with Hinduization and ethnicisation of inferior indigenous people as Nepalis. The book argues how the emergence of state formation, particularly the nation-state, the dominant culture and post-colonial institutional structure has constructed the Limbus as less valuable based on their certain cultural characteristics rather than their indigeneity. The author has divided the book into six chapters with separate introductions and conclusions.

Chapter one titled "The theory of Symbolic Violence", elaborated the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's innovative approach and its relevance to studying the embedded stratified social structure of hierarchy and domination through legitimation (Lama, p. 45). The chapter examines Bourdieu's interpretation of power relations as a type of social dominance in the opposing binary distinction of dominant and dominated. For example, his conceptual language of symbolic power, symbolic violence and symbolic capital, emphasized the significance of power in the social and political life of Limbus in three different settings. Lama has applied these approaches throughout the book to identify how the Limbu's cultural structure of three different configurations has been shaped by the dominant culture and dominant ideas brought by the rulers like the Tibeto Sikkimese Bhutia, British Colonial Hindus, Nepali/Gorkhas and mainland Indians. In this sense, the major focus has been on the prevailing discourse in three distinct environments that arguably serve to justify the hierarchies of social dominance

Chapter two on "Integration of Limbus in Pre-
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colonial Sikkim (c. 1642-1817)", aims to deconstruct the historical understanding of Limbu's structural identity during pre-colonial Sikkim and state formation by Tibeto-Sikkimese Bhutia (Tibetan migrants). The key argument of this chapter refers to the construction of Limbu identity as culturally inferior to the dominating Bhutia ruler and indigenous Lepcha people. After immigrating to Sikkim in the seventeenth century, the dominant Bhutia ruler subjugated the local ethnic group and categorized many of them as Limbu (Lama, p. 48). The chapter has argued that the process of integration has been characterized in favour of communal identity, state apparatus, land usage, law and labour. Thus, Limbus were denied certain privileges, positions and resources as well as being symbolically undervalued in their region. Cultural and religious elements legitimized the depreciation. The chapter also connects the modern development process with the rising institutionalization of the state as a nation-state and the adaptation of a superior religion by the dominant group notably Buddhism, both of which are related to wider processes of colonialism and capitalism.

In Chapter three titled "Integration of Limbus in Colonial Sikkim (1817-1947)", the author introduced the historical evidence (1817-1947) of Limbu's symbolical devaluing during the colonial period while implementing the discriminatory policy by the British in alliance with the dominant ruler, which considered them as Nepalis and thereby as immigrants into the state structures of colonial Sikkim (p. 87). This chapter also traces the pace of the British political occupation in Sikkim, a merger of Darjeeling Hills with the Bengal Presidency and outlining the borders between the states and Nepal. The reason behind these processes was linked to British political interest and colonialism. Lama significantly contended that how British rule favoured the dominant group while contributing another layer of dominance among the inferior groups and changed the conditions of dominance but not the structure of symbolic violence. As a result, Limbus were directly subjected to discrimination by British policies which legitimized their unequal integration into the state structures and constructed them as immigrant Hindu Nepali groups concerning the dominant Buddhist group (Tibetan migrant) who legitimized them as the indigenous group to Sikkim.

Chapter four titled "Integration of Limbus in Post-Colonial Sikkim (1947-present)", presented the pre and post-merger political history of Sikkim after Indian independence. The author contended that in both the situations Limbus were categorised in different modes but remained dominated. The chapter mainly scrutinizes the historical evidence of post-colonial state structure as like state administrative policies, treaties and political development with regard to unequal integration of Limbus in Sikkim. It also focused on how these new structures shape the symbolic order of inequalities among the Limbu ethnic group in a similar previous manner. The author also argued that after unification with India in 1975, how the Limbu lost their one reserved seat in the state legislative council and their pre-merger identification title 'Tsong' because of dominant political interest (p. 106). Subsequently, they were considered as the Nepali community and gradually as a Scheduled Tribe of Nepali origin since 2003. The author has critically evaluated that this classification of Limbus is tokenistic and misrecognition that obfuscates the constructed nature of domination but does not restore their indigeneity to Sikkim (Lama, p. 124).

In Chapter five, "Limbus as a Scheduled Tribe in Sikkim", the author explored the link between the anthropological aspect of historical narratives of Limbu's indigeneity, symbolic space and their contemporary classification as a Scheduled Tribe in Sikkim. Here, the author has argued for the construction of Limbu as a Scheduled Tribe rather than a Sikkimese indigenous ethnic group. As a result, this classification draws two distinct structural trajectories as a Scheduled Tribe, and as a distinct from Hindus. Similarly, their classification as generals in the state legislative assembly, along with Nepali and plainsmen, directly facilitates their identification as an ethnicized Nepali Hindu group. Although these two forms of the objective framework created an equivocal identity, which always placed them dominated in Sikkim. Therefore, the state reproduces the hierarchy of social structure through the new classification, which again created misrecognition and unequal integration in the sense of Limbus context in contemporary Sikkim's state structure.

Chapter six titled as "Configuration of Symbolic Violence in Sikkim Darjeeling and Nepal", mainly

focuses on “Manghim” worship or temple worship as symbolic practices of Limbus with a new cultural form and process that show variations in three different configurations. From a broader perspective, this chapter argues how Limbus started the practice of Manghim worship to reflect the symbolic dimensions of power relations, which are inherently linked to keeping social distinction and safeguarding against other dominant groups (p. 147). The chapter also portrays the vital roles of the most prominent Limbu pioneers such as Srigunja, Chemjong and Phalgunanda in shaping their scripts, culture and religion after the formation of the nation-state in all three settings. Moreover, this chapter also reveals the symbolic struggle of Limbus while drawing their cultural identity between Sikkimese Limbu and Nepalese Limbu, Darjeeling Limbus and Indian Limbus, etc because of their ways of practising Manghim worship in all the three settings.

The author summarises the questions on the unequal integration of small ethnic groups into state structure in the final section, focusing on the symbolic categorisation by the dominant group in India’s north-eastern border land (Lama, p. 178). From the perspective of symbolic violence, the book argues that Limbu’s cultural identity has been devalued which was first constructed and later naturalised by the various configurations of inequality, such as pre-

capitalist states, colonial and post-colonial states structures. The book aims to enlarge our overall understanding of the perpetual structural identity of symbolic violence and its fluctuating manifestations. The historical phase mostly with the emergence of nation-states has been exhibited as a discourse of indigeneity in Sikkim, immigrants in Darjeeling and superior Hindu Nepali culture in Nepal was only to serve the political function smoothly, while on the other hand its effect created structural inequalities in each state structure. The author convincingly portrayed the new perspective on Limbus from the Bourdieuan theory of symbolic violence. She points out correctly that the duality that has been manifested in Limbus of different configurations to reform their cultural identity in the contemporary situation. The responsibility to rectify this misrecognition and misperception of Limbus does not rely on the Limbus ethnic group alone, but the effective state institutional reform that needs to be addressed. Lastly, the author has given much attention to the historical evidence of Sikkim only, while it would have been more beneficial if she gave similar attention to other two configurations also.

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