

## Review

### “Ethnic Inequality in the Northeastern Indian Borderlands: Social Structures and Symbolic Violence” by Anita Lama<sup>1</sup>

Tanka Bahadur Subba<sup>2</sup>

Reading *Ethnic Inequality in the Northeastern Indian Borderlands: Social Structures and Symbolic Violence* by Anita Lama, published by Routledge, was a sheer joy. Honestly speaking, I learned a lot about my community, which is the focus of her book. The language is smooth and the arguments, although at times repetitive, are consistent and coherent. It is an excellent example of how historical and contemporary data can be woven with theory to tell the story of one of the marginalized (“dominated” to use the author’s word) Himalayan communities. Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence to understanding the status of the Limbus of Darjeeling, Sikkim, and East Nepal vis-à-vis the state or the dominant communities in these three contexts is quite convincing, to say the least. In general, I agree with the author about the applicability of Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence to marginalized communities of the eastern Himalayas. I also commend her for making this wonderful effort to explain why marginalized or subjugated communities come to accept the discourses released and sustained by dominant communities. I think she has been successful in putting the marginalized communities and their cultural practices in proper theoretical perspective for which she deserves all appreciation.

However, some points of critique should be mentioned. One, the title of the book would be more appropriate if “Northeastern Indian Borderlands” were to be replaced with “Eastern Himalayas”. If we unbound the region called “North-East India” it will not be a crime to include Darjeeling and East Nepal in it, but in the psyche of most people of the region, even Sikkim is not really a part of it, having joined the region only about a couple of decades ago. The people of the region still speak of the “seven sisters”, which excludes Sikkim. The lack of geographical contiguity with the rest of the region has made the position of Sikkim rather awkward in the company of the seven sisters.

Two, the book would do a lot better if some minor irritants were to go. For instance, the extended initials of GTA are “Gorkhaland Territorial Administration” and not “Gorkha Territorial Area,” as she mentions (p. viii). On page 2, she categorizes the history of Sikkim into pre-capitalist, colonial, and postcolonial whereas the word “precapitalist” should have been “pre-colonial”. On page 5, she has taken the colonial writings for granted, which say that the word Lepcha means “vile speakers”, which is wrong. The word “Lepcha” has no etymological basis in the Nepali language. Some chapters are heavily based on one single source, which I think is not a good idea no matter how important the sources are. For instance, Chapter I is heavily based on David Swartz’s reading of Bourdieu, Chapter II on the book by Saul Mullard, and Chapter IV on the work of S.K. Gurung. Some very important historical dates are wrongly written. For instance, on page 64, the formation of the Gorkha kingdom of Nepal is mentioned as 1968 whereas the correct date is 1769. Some important publications are also missing from the book.

For instance, while discussing the history of Darjeeling, the mention of Fred Pinn’s *The Road to Destiny* is not mentioned and, while talking about Indo-Tibetan trade, there is no mention of the important publication by Tina Harris. Similarly, while discussing the annexation or merger of Sikkim with India, the important publications by Sunanda K. Datta-Ray and the RAW officer GBS Sidhu are missing. On page 119, the author makes a mention of the sense of discrimination felt by the Limbu teachers of Sikkim University because they were appointed as ad hoc teachers. First of all, they were not discriminated against, and the same stood for the Lepcha and Bhutia teachers as well. Secondly, they could not be appointed on regular basis without fulfilling the UGC criteria for the post, which none of them fulfilled. On page 169, “matwali” is wrongly translated as “drunkards” whereas “matwali” means those who are culturally not prohibited to drink if they so wish. On the very next page, a Limbu saying has been wrongly translated to imply that they are “instinctive cold-blooded savages”; the saying simply means that they are hot-headed people. Being cold-blooded and hot-headed are not the same thing by any stretch of imagination.

Finally, a comment on her bibliography is desperately called for because this is the weakest part of the book. The author chooses to use the word “bibliography” over “references”. This gives her the opportunity to list all those she would have read in connection with what she has written, but not considered important to cite in the text. Indeed, she has listed several books/articles that are not discussed in the text, which is absolutely fine in a bibliography. What is not acceptable is to give references to various authors in the text and even mention the years of publication in parenthesis, but not to list them in the bibliography; Or to refer to one publication in the text and cite some other publication in the bibliography; Or to list them without making a distinction between an article, journal, or book in which an article was published. Even concerning the publications of Pierre Bourdieu, of which 10 are mentioned in the text, only two are listed in the bibliography. This is certainly not acceptable because the entire book revolves around Bourdieu.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lama, Anita. 2020. *Ethnic Inequality in the Northeastern Indian Borderlands: Social Structures and Symbolic Violence*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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