Bond, Nathan (2017). 'Review of "Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland: Constructing Democracy."' *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 28(3):381-383. DOI: 10.1111/taja.12252

[p. 381] Mona Chettri's monograph on ethnicity and democracy in the eastern Himalayas is the latest from Amsterdam University Press' Asian Borderlands series. Written in clear and concise prose, the book describes historical and contemporary ethnopolitics across Sikkim (India), Darjeeling (India) and eastern Nepal. Drawing on engagement over her lifetime, several periods of more intensive fieldwork, and historical research, Chettri focuses on the Nepali ethnic group spanning this region. [p. 382]

In the introduction Chettri sets out three interrelated theses that shape the book. Firstly, that 'there is a transformation of ethnic identity into political resource and a concomitant re-drawing of cultural boundaries of ... the Nepali ethnic group' (15). Secondly, that the 'pervasiveness of ethnic politics is ... an indication of the nature of the relationship between the state and the society' (16). And thirdly, that 'the democratic approach as subscribed to by all modern South Asian nations provides very important parameters for political action' (17).

In five subsequent chapters and a conclusion, Chettri addresses a cluster of issues centred on these theses. The discussion spans an impressive breadth of empirical dynamics, including Nepali ethnogenesis, migration, cross-border flows, political movements for ethnic homelands, struggles to obtain special tribal recognition, the sharpening and instrumentalisation of ethnic identity, the political economy of development, notions of indigeneity, ethnic associations and political parties, everyday and spectacular ethnic performances, ethnic patronage and elites, the vernacularisation of democracy, and so on. Yet the discussion remains coherent and logically structured throughout the work.

One of the book's major strengths is expressed most clearly in the final chapter and conclusion. In line with the third thesis above, a convincing argument is put forward to the effect that a formal political sphere characterised by exclusive ethnic identities need not conflict with democracy (155ff.). Chettri finds that the ethnic idiom of formal politics and, it is suggested, everyday life in the region, has contoured the vernacularisation of democracy along ethnic lines. Despite its shortcomings and privileging of certain political concerns over others, this 'ethnic politics' is a 'people's politics' (161). The argument, significant for basic and normative scholarship, contrasts with approaches that would treat ethnic exclusivity and democracy as to some extent mutually antagonistic. The author recommends that future work considers what 'democracy' means to people, what hopes it evokes, and how it is performed. The book provides a substantial contribution toward this effort in relation to ethnicity as well as being a starting point for addressing these questions further.

Yet the same questions that apply to democracy also apply to several key concepts in the work that are not as closely considered. A significant part of the analysis posits boundaries between certain fields, like 'politics' and 'culture,' and then asserts that these boundaries are often crossed, dissolved, and brokered across (e.g. 31, 145). If this is indeed the case, the argument would have been more compelling if it were clearly demonstrated that the people being discussed actually subscribe to and separate such domains. In general I would have been interested to see the rich ethnographic materials drawn on have a greater influence over the conceptual vocabulary and analytical approach adopted.

In particular, the heavy reliance on the heuristic of 'state-society relations' is a shortcoming here. 'The state' appears throughout the book as a reified actor that enters into relations with 'society,' with assertions of 'its' causative agency frequently being made. Much work across the social sciences has formulated a robust critique of this approach, drawing attention instead to state effects and images, the imagination of the state and the magic of the state. The approach adopted in the book is not explicitly justified in relation to this body of theory. It would perhaps have been productive to consider more thoroughly how people imagine and conjure 'the state' in the first place rather than beginning with an a priori conceptualisation of it (27, fn. 7).

Nonetheless, *Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalayan Borderland* forms a significant contribution to the social-scientific literature on the region and debates over the relations between ethnicity and democracy. Through its in-depth case studies it touches on issues of widespread importance in the politics of the contemporary world. Where studies of borderlands all too often address only one side of the border, the well-

rounded coverage of both Nepalese and Indian regions is methodologically and empirically commendable. Regional specialists in [p. 383] South Asia and the Himalayas will take interest in the book's evocation of the historical and contemporary ethnopolitics of the region. For its arguments concerning ethnicity and democracy, the book will appeal to scholars across political sociology, political science, borderlands studies, development studies, and cognate fields.