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Chapter 5

Ethnic (P)reservations

Comparing Thangmi Ethnic Activism in Nepal and India

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INTRODUCTION

Although the conference from which this volume comes was conceived in terms of the connection between ‘activism’ and ‘civil society’, I have never really conceptualized my research under either of those rubrics.¹ Instead, I have cast it as a study of the cross-border politics and performance of identity within a putatively singular ethnic group, the Thangmi,² who have substantial populations in two nations: Nepal and India. The Thangmi homeland is in Nepal’s central-eastern hill districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, but members of the group have been migrating to Darjeeling, in West Bengal, India, to work for over 150 years. Many of the people within the Thangmi community who are most vocal about ethnicity and identity issues can be classed as activists, but one of the fundamental premises of this paper is that political discourse (as articulated by ethno-activists) constitutes only one element in the overall process of ethnic identity production. In the Thangmi context, the other most influential element is cultural practice, particularly in the form of ritual. In many situations these two aspects of identity production—political discourse and cultural practice—remain in tension with each other.³ I argue that the Thangmi community in Nepal has emphasized cultural practice over political discourse as the central process through which identity is produced, while the Thangmi community in India has done just the opposite by emphasizing political discourse as primary.

I suggest further that these differences in focus have emerged largely in reaction to Nepal and India's historically distinct approaches to legislating ethnicity at the state level.

These oppositions between discourse and practice in India and Nepal are not hard and fast by any means, precisely because each community needs the other's experience and input in order to make their own ethnic strategy work. I use the term 'feedback loop' to describe the process through which ethnic identity emerges through a process of communication between the two Thangmi groups. In my definition, feedback loops are the processes of cross-border communication and exchange through which ideologies of ethnicity originating in discrete nation-state contexts become embedded in both the discursive and practical aspects of cultural production elsewhere, and influence the lives of ethnic individuals living outside of that nation's borders.

At the theoretical level, I aim to forge a middle way between two popular social scientific approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between ethnicity and the nation-state. The first suggests that ethnicity is an exclusive product of the modern nation-state, emerging only within clearly demarcated national boundaries (Gladney, 1991; Verdery, 1994; Williams, 1989). The second emphasizes the narrative of 'de-territorialization' (Appadurai, 1990; Inda and Rosaldo, 2002), which suggests that due to constant border-crossing movements including transnational labour migration, conflict-induced displacement, and cosmopolitan jet-setting, locality and national borders are no longer the primary factors in shaping ethnic identity. The Thangmi case is a clear example of a situation where ethnicity is at once shaped strongly by country-specific concepts, yet also dependent on a dialogue across state borders. I hope to show that for the Thangmi, the feedback loop in operation between the communities in Nepal and India creates a cyclical process of cultural reproduction which on the one hand emerges out of the specific national contexts in question, but on the other, transcends their boundaries to create a synthesis independent of either nation-state taken alone.

In short, then, this is not really a chapter about activism as such, but rather about the relationships between discourse and practice, state policy and subjective experience that span national borders and shape the field of identity production in which ethnic activists, among others, are engaged. I do put forth one specific proposition

about how these broader dynamics shape Thangmi (and perhaps other) activist agendas in India and Nepal: that the presence or absence of a reservation system in each state context has compelled Thangmi ethno-activists to structure their campaigns very differently. In Nepal, the focus is on basic rights and development, while in India the emphasis is on cultural preservation. In theory these are complementary agendas, both of which are often at the heart of indigenous movements, but I argue that in this particular situation the agendas of political rights and cultural preservation are often at odds with each other at a practical level.

The lack of an affirmative action system in Nepal means that the Nepal Thami Samaj (hereafter NTS) must work hard even to gain basic name recognition and government services in their homeland areas, and since most Thangmi resident in Nepal remain intimately involved in cultural practice (particularly through language and ritual), preservation of culture is not as pressing a concern.⁴ By contrast, India's long-standing reservations system means that Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (hereafter BTWA) members are assured not only of recognition, but financial and other benefits as well, which leaves them free to pursue the more abstract agenda of cultural preservation—and this is a pressing issue for them precisely because they have become largely dislocated from Thangmi cultural practice. Moreover, the reservations system's peculiarities compel Thangmi activists in India to perform complex cultural acrobatics in order to live up to the official definition of 'culture' to which their rights are attached. In this process, 'culture' is changed rather than preserved in the name of attaining indigenous rights. One of the main themes I want to explore here, then, is how the presence or absence of a state-mandated reservations system affects ethnic identity at both practical and discursive levels, and, linking this question to the feedback loop theme, how the forms of identity that emerge in each context (with and without reservations) in fact influence each other.

WHY NO ETHNICITY IN DARJEELING?

In recent years, Darjeeling has become recognized as an important site of Nepali national identity production (Chalmers, 2003; Hutt, 1997; Onta, 1996, 1999). The violent Gorkhaland movement for

Nepali autonomy in Darjeeling that emerged in the late 1980s showed beyond a doubt that Nepali national identity was alive and well in India (Subba, 1992). Yet there has been little discussion of the dynamics of ethnicity *within* the Nepali community in Darjeeling, nor of the connections between particular ethnic communities in Darjeeling and their counterparts back in Nepal.

In some respects, this is understandable, since the first thing any visitor coming from Nepal to Darjeeling will notice is that ethnicity and caste do not function as rigid markers of stratification as they often do inside Nepal. To some extent, this difference can be attributed to the well-documented diaspora phenomenon in which national identities shift into primary positions for individuals in relation to ethnic, caste, or racial identities when groups move from one country to another. It is also a result of comparatively liberal attitudes towards mixed marriage within the Darjeeling Nepali community: despite maintaining ethnic and caste names, almost all Darjeeling inhabitants are linked with members of putatively distinct ethnic groups through kinship, as well as through informal community relationships.⁵

In good Andersonian fashion, all of the studies of Nepali nationalism in Darjeeling emphasize the major role literature played in consolidating this new identity, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. This emphasis on the discursive production of Nepali national identity to the exclusion of ethnic identity is not just an academic bias but, in my understanding, a relatively accurate reflection of the way in which Darjeeling Nepali activists were likely to have represented themselves until the early 1990s. The Gorkhaland movement was driven by a generation of 'Gorkhali' nationalists who were ideologically committed to the notion that individual ethnic identities must be secondary to a united Nepali ethnic identity if Indians of Nepali heritage were to gain any benefits from the state. For this reason, intra-Nepali identity politics as such only emerged in full force in Darjeeling in the early 1990s, in large part in reaction to the disillusionment felt by many when the 1989 settlement which ended the Gorkhaland agitation was not perceived to bring many real benefits for Indian citizens of Nepali heritage. The notion that shifting from a Nepali national identity strategy to a group-by-group ethnic identity strategy would be a productive avenue for gaining benefits from the state began to gain currency after 1993, when the Mandal Commission published its recommendations for revising the

Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backwards Classes (OBC) system of reservations and instituting a new system of benefits.⁶ The generation gap on this issue between older Darjeeling Nepalis and their successors is very clear, and worthy of more discussion elsewhere. In short, however, the contemporary situation warrants a much closer look at the dynamics of *ethnic* identity within the Darjeeling Nepali community, and the relationships between Darjeeling activists and their counterparts in Nepal.

Figure 5.1
Areas of Thangmi Settlement in Nepal, India and China (TAR)



Source: Author.

(This map is not to scale and does not depict authentic boundaries)

IDENTITY AS PRACTICE IN THE THANGMI HOMELAND

Within Nepal, the Thangmi community numbers approximately 35,000.⁷ The majority of the population lives in the districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, with notable communities in Ramechhap, Ilam, and Jhapa, and smaller numbers in Kathmandu and 10 other districts. Thangmi individual residents of Nepal, for the most part, continue to speak their distinct Tibeto-Burman language and maintain their own system of ritual practice, which is centred around indigenous shamanic practitioners, but which also incorporates aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism. Despite their relatively large numbers, the Thangmi as a group have until very recently remained absent from political discourses on ethnicity at

the national level, as well as scholarly discourses about ethnicity in Nepal. The Thangmi homeland area is not particularly remote by Nepalese standards: the two roadheads leading into the area are four to six hours away from Kathmandu by bus, with an additional walk of anything from one hour to three days to reach the farthest Thangmi villages. However, for the most part the Thangmi remain one of the most economically disadvantaged and politically disenfranchised populations in the country.

In several seminal ethnographic surveys of Nepal (Bista, 1967; Gaborieau, 1978), the Thangmi are classified as either a sub-group of the larger and better-known Tamang or Rai/Kiranti groups. This classification is not linguistically accurate, nor does it reflect Thangmi self-identification.⁸ The Thangmi are not mentioned in the Muluki Ain, the Nepali civil code propagated in 1854 that codified many ethnic boundaries (cf. Macdonald, 1975; Höfer, 1979). Their status is further confused by the fact that the Nepalified term ‘Thami’, which is used by others to refer to them, sounds very similar both to ‘Kami’, the low-caste blacksmith group, and *dhami*, an often derogatory term used for faith healers from a range of ethnic backgrounds. For Nepalis who have never heard of the Thangmi, these terms are easily conflated with ‘Thami’ to produce the misconception that the Thangmi are a low-caste group within the Hindu caste hierarchy.

In the homeland areas, Thangmi identity is defined by a complex relationship between absence from national discourse and a strong cultural presence at the local, territorially defined level. Most Nepalis, including intellectuals and ethnic activists, have never heard of the Thangmi, and this absence from ethno-political discourse at the national level plays a large part in constituting Thangmi self-consciousness as a marginalized group ‘without culture’. When I first began my fieldwork, I was stymied when one senior shaman after another answered my questions about Thangmi culture with a dismissive wave of the hand and one of a number of phrases all implying ‘there is no such thing’. These self-representations as ‘lacking culture’ are voiced in acknowledgement of the non-existent status of the Thangmi within a national system for categorizing ethnicity that has advanced an overly objectified notion of ‘culture’ as a static, pure, and clearly bounded entity maintained by individual, homogeneous ‘ethnic groups’. Typically, Thangmi informants follow up statements about Thangmi cultural absence with a reference to

how this makes them unlike other ethnic groups, most commonly Tamang, Gurung, or Rai—all groups with larger population numbers who have active ethno-political organizations operating on the national level.⁹ Indigenous Thangmi articulations of cultural difference between themselves and these other groups—who are also all *matwali* speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages who might be seen as sharing a great deal with the Thangmi—emphasize the notion that while all of these groups have to some degree objectified their ‘culture’ in such a way that it can be easily identified and classified by the nation-state, the Thangmi have not fully succeeded in doing so.¹⁰ The statement that ‘Thangmi have no culture’, then, is not absolute, but rather contextual, taking on meaning only at the nation-state level, in relation to the discursive production of ethnicity as a system which contains only certain kinds of ‘ethnic culture’.

When viewed from a phenomenological perspective, which emphasizes the experiential aspects of cultural identity as expressed through ritual action, it becomes clear that Thangmi culture is in no way absent, but rather a very present living tradition. Recognizing the elements of this practice requires a shift in register from national discourse to local practice. For Thangmi individuals, an important part of the cultural meaning which constitutes ethnic identity is produced through participation in a diverse set of ritual practices which include life cycle rituals (particularly marriage and death), rituals in honour of territorial deities, and larger multi-ethnic rituals in which relations of power are negotiated between the Thangmi and other local groups.¹¹

Despite their history of migration, Thangmi identity remains essentially linked to the territory in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok that I have designated as the Thangmi homeland. Thangmi territory is construed as a key symbol for Thangmi identity, both constituting and expressing the boundaries of an ontological world in which the practice of culture need not be objectified so as to meet the expectations of the nation-state. This is accomplished in large part through the *mumpra*, or Thangmi death ritual, which is unquestionably the dominant element in the larger complex of life-cycle rituals. The *mumpra* enacts a territorially based sense of indigeneity by symbolically ‘nailing’ corpses of the deceased to the land and thereby literally constructing territory out of ancestral Thangmi bodies. In keeping with this interpretation, discussing the details of the *mumpra* with non-Thangmi outsiders is taboo, and the chief mourner is explicitly

forbidden to speak even a single word to members of other ethnic groups during the entire 49-day mourning period. Even members of other ethnic groups who share common space in the village are not allowed in Thangmi cremation grounds, and often do not even know where they are located, despite their proximity to the village.

In this sense, Thangmi practice is intentionally divorced from the broader world of discourse, particularly national discourse. Perhaps this is a self-protective move taken by a group whose experiences with ethnic others have often been characterized by relations of exploitation and/or a failure to acknowledge Thangmi identity as a legitimate and coherent one. Regardless of whatever exploitation (often through land appropriation) or discrimination they may face, Thangmi individuals find confidence in the knowledge that the ground upon which these often discouraging encounters with ethnic others play out is nonetheless the distinctive embodiment of Thangmi history.

So what, precisely, distinguishes the trajectory of Thangmi history from that of any other ethnic group within Nepal's borders? Here, the conceptually more complicated theme of mixture as a marker of Thangmi identity comes into play. In the Thangmi origin story, which is chanted at the beginning of every ritual, the origins of Thangmi religion, race, and language are explicitly articulated as hybrid ones. According to this narrative, their religion is a syncretic combination of Hindu and Buddhist practices, which when mixed with indigenous shamanism are synthesized as 'Thangmi *dharma*'.¹² It is through engaging in these ritual practices on a regular basis that individuals become culturally Thangmi. The origin story alludes to the group's mixed racial origins with multiple symbolic elements.¹³ As one of the elder shamans I worked with once explained, the story accounts for the Thangmi language as follows: "When the world began, Bali Raja first gave language to the seventeen other ethnic groups. By the time he got to the Thangmi, there was nothing left. So Ya'apa (the Thangmi forefather) had to mix and match from the languages the other groups had already been given."

It is precisely this unusual reliance on cultural mixture as a marker of identity that sets Thangmi identity apart from others within the Nepali ethnic field. This is not to suggest that other ethnic groups are empirically any more racially, culturally, religiously, or linguistically 'pure', but rather that the Thangmi not only speak openly of the common processes of hybridity which other groups vehemently deny, but also draw upon it as a source for their own identity.

The explicit Thangmi emphasis on mixture of all sorts is one more way in which they fall short of the mark in establishing a cultural 'presence' within the existing national ideological framework based on Hindu principles of purity. This lack prompts indigenous statements of cultural 'absence'. But again, it is precisely this lack of 'culture', as manifested in the constant practice of syncretic rituals, which establishes their identity as unique within the national context.

In this sense, the homeland Thangmi formulation of identity articulates an alternative 'nation-view' (Duara, 1996) of what it is to be Nepali: that is, it makes explicit the otherwise implicit hybridity underlying the very existence of Nepal as a nation. In this regard, Thangmi ontology recognizes the nation-state's formula for ethnicity, but ethnic consciousness is not delimited exclusively by it.

This attitude is exemplified in the suspicion articulated by many homeland Thangmi towards the discursive approaches to defining ethnic identity that other groups within Nepal have deployed as part of the Janajati ethno-political movement since the early 1990s. Although the NTS has been engaged in an important phase of confidence-building among rural Thangmi communities over the last several years, until very recently many homeland Thangmi, in particular older ritual practitioners, were sceptical about the participation of younger Thangmi in ethno-political organizations. In the early days of Thangmi organizations in Nepal, many of the leaders were either originally from Darjeeling or had returned to Nepal after many years of living in India. The agenda items such officers promoted were for the most part based on experiences within an Indian national context, rather than in village Nepal. In short, the critique made by many homeland Thangmi was that the attempt to codify Thangmi cultural practice in the discursive terms of the Nepali state was a contradiction in terms, and manipulations of identity intended to gain recognition at the centre were largely pointless because there were few concrete benefits to be gained from these strategies.¹⁴ Unlike in India, being recognized as a minority ethnic group within Nepal afforded no direct economic or educational benefits. Considering the relatively weak nature of the Nepali state, which had little governmental presence outside the urban centre of Kathmandu, any promises made were unlikely to be kept. Many Thangmi residing in the rural homeland areas therefore reasoned that participation in political discourses on ethnicity at the national level could only benefit those individuals who could afford to live in the city, usually young men, and make use

of ‘ethnic activism’ as a channel for garnering personal power. For all of these reasons, many Thangmi in homeland village areas have at times felt that activists who claimed to speak on behalf of ‘the Thangmi’ did not in fact represent them.¹⁵

This situation is beginning to change, but only slowly. One of the primary issues discussed at the Second National Thami Convention held in May 2005 in Kathmandu (attended by 250 representatives from four districts) was how the organization could do a better job at understanding Thangmi concerns and representing them at the national level. It appeared to be the first time that these issues were openly acknowledged and discussed in depth within the organization in a formal setting. This was certainly a positive step forward, but there was still a fundamental problem underlying the convention itself: it had been scheduled on the same weekend as the Bhume Jatra festival (held on the day of Buddha Jayanti), one of the two most important Thangmi ritual days of the entire year. This meant that potential participants had to make an either-or choice between cultural practice and political discourse that weekend, underscoring the tension between these two aspects of Thangmi identity. It was unclear whether the convention had been intentionally planned on this date so as to prevent a delegation of critical ‘culturalists’ from the homeland areas from participating (as it was, only one senior shaman from Dolakha attended the conference), thereby allowing the activists to get an upper hand in shaping the organization’s future; or whether the scheduling conflict was a genuine mistake that simply could not be resolved once the hall had been booked and other commitments made. Even if the latter is true, which I think is the more likely explanation, the very fact that such plans could have been made without the conflict being noticed until it was too late demonstrates the lack of communication between different sub-groups of the Thangmi community in Nepal.

IDENTITY AS DISCOURSE IN DARJEELING

Taking up the seats that the shamans might have filled at the convention, sat instead a six-member delegation from the BTWA. All Indian citizens resident in Darjeeling bazaar, they were descendants of migrant labourers who left Nepal beginning in the mid 1800s to take advantage of new job opportunities in the British tea and

tourist economies.¹⁶ The Thangmi were not the only ethnic group who left situations of land scarcity, exploitation, and discrimination in Nepal's eastern hills to look for a better life in British India and later in the post-colonial state—one finds members of almost every Nepali group in Darjeeling—but a relatively large proportion of the Thangmi population seems to have migrated eastwards either permanently or temporarily. The population figures for Thangmi living in Darjeeling district as well as the neighbouring state of Sikkim (counting only those who hold Indian citizenship) are estimated at 8,000—over 20 per cent of the total Thangmi population.¹⁷ Those families who settled in Darjeeling early on for the most part experienced upward social mobility, in large part due to economic opportunities and the absence of the feudal social system that made social and economic advancement difficult in Nepal. In many families, grandparents who came as porters raised children who went into business or the hotel/restaurant industry, and their grandchildren have gone on to higher education and high-level government positions. Seasonal migrations continue, with many Thangmi from Nepal spending three to six months of the year as labourers in Darjeeling.

There is therefore a broad spectrum of Thangmi in Darjeeling: at one end are Indian citizens whose families who have been settled in Darjeeling for up to five generations and who have never been to Nepal, while at the other end are citizens of Nepal who have come for a few months to work in Darjeeling for the first time. In the middle are a wide range of people: some were born in Darjeeling but have maintained strong family contacts in Nepal, others were born in Nepal but grew up and settled in Darjeeling, and still others have been coming and going as migrant labourers for 20–30 years and spend equal parts of the year in each location. Many people in this gray area have both Nepali and Indian papers (although dual citizenship is technically illegal). There is little contact between people at the far ends of the spectrum. Middle-class Thangmi in India often view poor Thangmi from Nepal as dirty and uneducated, and therefore a disgrace to the Thangmi name, while Thangmi from Nepal can experience Thangmi from India as pompous and disingenuous, since they lack linguistic and cultural knowledge and hence appear to be Thangmi in name only.

It is therefore through the middle category of people that the feedback loop actually functions, although the content fed into it from the Darjeeling side is shaped largely by the leadership of the BTWA.

For the most part, the organization's officers fall within the first category of long-settled Indian citizens. Of the six people who attended the convention in Kathmandu (which included the General Secretary, Vice President, and Treasurer of the BTWA), only one was born in Nepal, but her family had settled in Darjeeling when she was four years old and had few ties with their home village.

Although they trace their heritage to Nepal,¹⁸ those born and bred in India are proud of their Indian citizenship and concomitantly make claims on the state that could only emerge under the logic of ethnicity operative in India. Two features of the Darjeeling Thangmi situation set it starkly apart from that in Nepal. First of all, Darjeeling Thangmis are almost entirely alienated from the territorially based ritual practices that constitute Thangmi identity in the homeland areas in Nepal, as described earlier. Second, regardless of their class or background, those who are Indian citizens stand to reap substantial economic, educational, and employment benefits within India's reservations system if they can hit upon the right recipe for concretizing Thangmi culture. However, their limited access to cultural practice requires them to rely almost exclusively on discursive strategies for creating identity, and this tendency is further reinforced by the requirements of the reservations system.

Thangmi in India have been formally organized on an ethnic basis from as early as 1943, when the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj (BLTS) was registered with the government, followed by the establishment of the Thami Jyoti Primary School in 1945. However, photographic evidence suggests that informal meetings of Thangmi migrants in Darjeeling date back at least as far as 1936. Given the comparatively small population numbers and low economic status of the Thangmi, the BLTS was a remarkably successful example of an early *ethnic* organization in Darjeeling, in contrast to organizations that promoted an inter-ethnic *regional* identity or a pan-Nepali *national* identity, such as the Hillmen's Association and the All India Gorkha League (both of which had been active since the early 1920s).¹⁹ Intriguingly, BLTS was originally founded for the purpose of organizing and fundraising for Thangmi funeral rituals. This attests both to the fact that Thangmi migrants in Darjeeling during this era felt themselves to have a distinctive religious practice and were not satisfied with commissioning Buddhist *lamas* or Hindu *pandits* (both of whom would have been easily available) to conduct their death rituals,

and, as argued above, that death rituals themselves are the most fundamental event through which Thangmi ethnic identity is performed. The 1943 establishment of BLTS also provides some circumstantial evidence that intra-Nepali ethnic identities were still important at this historical juncture, despite the call to join arms in the campaign for a pan-Nepali identity.

Although the Jyoti Thami Primary School closed due to lack of funds in the mid-1960s, BLTS remained active and changed its name to the Thami Welfare Association ('Bharatiya' [Indian] was prefixed only in the 1990s), which continues to be the official Thangmi ethnic organization in India today. This suggests that the Darjeeling Thangmi never lost a sense of cohesive identity, although along the way they may have lost their grasp of the practices that originally constituted it. Few shamans migrated to Darjeeling, and even if they had, it would have been difficult to carry on ethnic practices publicly while the loyalty of all Nepalis to the new Indian nation was already in question in the post-Independence era. One politically active Darjeeling Thangmi explained:

When the Scheduled Tribe system was first established [in the early 1950s], the government offered us the chance to be listed. But the Tamang had refused, saying that they were too important to be seen as an underprivileged group, and we Thangmi followed suit. We wanted to be seen as Indian citizens with Nepali heritage, not some little tribe.

This feeling had changed substantially by the early 1990s, after the government of India promised to implement the recommendations of the controversial Mandal commission, which stipulated a new system of economic benefits for SC, ST, and OBC. Suddenly, with substantial material benefits perceived to be in the offing, the Thangmi as well as other groups of Nepali heritage became interested in seeking this status. By 1990, two generations of Thangmi had come of age as Indian citizens. Educated in Indian schools, and largely holding government jobs, they were well versed in the discursive strategies of the state. In 1993, they began the process of applying for OBC status in West Bengal. But there was one problem: almost none of them spoke the Thangmi language or had ever participated in Thangmi ritual practice. The application forms for OBC status required detailed explanation of Thangmi 'culture', and they were at a loss for words.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP ACCELERATES

The BTWA leadership, who had previously sought to distance themselves from Thangmi migrant workers from Nepal in order to assert their Indianness, as well as their economic superiority, began seeking out the migrant labourers who could provide introductions back in the homeland. There, the Darjeeling Thangmi hoped to find culture in practice so that it could be turned into the discursive stuff of identity politics within the Indian state. One high-ranking member of the BTWA explained to me in 2000, “All of the important things about the Thangmi culture have been hidden. The Thangmi are like the beads of a broken necklace that have been scattered all over the place. And now it’s time to find them and put them back together again.”

With this agenda, groups of politically active Darjeeling Thangmi began making “cultural tours” to the Thangmi homeland areas in Nepal in the mid-1990s. They were particularly intent on collecting aspects of Thangmi cultural identity in practice that could be objectified in discursive form, and they therefore focused on collecting Thangmi origin stories and linguistic data. In general, they were less confident about how to engage with the explicitly ritualized aspects of Thangmi cultural practice. Coming from post-colonial educational backgrounds that emphasized a secular, rational, and modern vision of Indian nationalism, they were uncomfortable with the overwhelming evidence that their ethnic practice was in fact a highly ritualized, ‘traditional’ shamanic form. They were frustrated that they could not clearly classify these practices as either Hindu or Buddhist. But they were most perturbed about the fact that when they asked the seemingly simple question, “What is Thangmi culture?” to senior Thangmi shamans in Nepal who were obviously pre-eminent practitioners of it, they received the answer, as I had, “There is none”. They had come up against the Thangmi reaction to Nepali national classificatory projects: the refusal to objectify a practice of mixture within the political discourse of pure, discrete ethnic identities.

After the first few trips, the Darjeeling Thangmi travellers returned home with a profusion of contradictory data. They managed to make something out of it for their application, and received OBC status at the West Bengal state level in 1995, and at the national level in 2002. But the project was no longer just about gaining benefits from the state. For many Darjeeling Thangmis,

the exposure to Thangmi ethnic practice in the homeland had sparked both a genuine desire to understand this aspect of their own identity, and to erase its idiosyncrasies so as to standardize it in discursive terms that would work for them within the Indian national framework. From the perspective of Thangmi in India the Thangmi in Nepal needed to be educated about the power of discursive identity politics, and shown how to distill an 'authentic' set of practices from the wildly varied and inconsistent ones they practised. This project began with a 'lecture tour' in the homeland areas of Nepal by several members of the Darjeeling leadership, and ended with the installation of a Darjeeling Thangmi, who was resident in Kathmandu, as the chairman of the NTS in 2001.

The Darjeeling Thangmi approach to and appropriation of existing practice both irritated and piqued the interest of many homeland Thangmi. On the one hand, there was a sense of frustration that outsiders, Indians no less,²⁰ would dare tell them what to do, and would manipulate cultural practices appropriated from Nepal for political purposes. The insinuation that Thangmi in Nepal were somehow mishandling their own representation of ethnicity vis-à-vis the Nepali state and needed outside help was particularly irritating. But on the other hand, there was something attractive and impressive about the ability of Thangmi in India to turn practice into discourse. Precisely because this discursive strategies originated in a different national context, free from the shackles of Hindu hierarchy that informed state discourse in Nepal (although perhaps differently encumbered by secular modernism), for the first time many Thangmi in Nepal could begin to see how linking such discursive strategies with their existing cultural practice might contribute to their ability to both maintain their own culture and use it as a basis for gaining political rights, rather than simply marking a capitulation to the state's oppressive classification system.

DESPERATELY SEEKING SCHEDULED TRIBE STATUS

Obtaining OBC status had been the rallying cry for the BTWA through the early 1990s, but after it was granted in 1995, people began to complain that the associated benefits were not adequate. 'OBC *bhaneko nājt na bhāt*' is a common refrain heard in Darjeeling Thangmi households: literally, 'OBC means neither caste nor rice'. In short, being an OBC fails to guarantee either the symbolic or the

economic benefits that being an SC or ST does. OBC individuals receive a break on examination marks and job qualifications, but not the low-interest loans and explicit job reservations that SCs and STs benefit from. Also, because the government of India has recognized several new groups as OBC over the last decade, the potential benefit for one group or individual has been diluted simply by the large numbers of people classed as such.²¹ Since the benefits are not perceived to be substantial, relatively few Thangmi have made the effort to go through the bureaucratic process of getting an OBC certificate issued, which entails submitting a detailed application to the District Magistrate followed by a courtroom hearing. As of late 2004, only approximately 160 Thangmi individuals had been issued OBC certificates.

Despite this lack of enthusiasm at the practical level, most members of the Darjeeling Thangmi community (both active BTWA members and lay people) continued to view OBC status as a necessary stepping stone on the way to the real prize—ST status. With effect from January, 2003, the Limbu and the Tamang were recognized as STs by the state of Sikkim, and thereafter by the central government, which further galvanized the BTWA into action.

During my fieldwork in Darjeeling in late 2004–early 2005, seeking ST status was a primary concern for the Thangmi community and particularly the BTWA leadership. The organization was engaged in correspondence with the Commission on Tribal Affairs to try to determine the criteria used to evaluate a group's authenticity as a 'tribe'. The requirements remained vague: there was no comprehensive government publication that spelled out the details clearly in one place.²² To complicate matters, groups that had already received ST status such as the Tamang and Limbu were guarding their own documentation like the crown jewels, and despite their best efforts, BTWA members could not gain access to the Tamang or Limbu archives, and were even forcibly turned away on one occasion. This information vacuum encouraged BTWA members to hypothesize wildly about what the state might want to see as evidence of Thangmi 'tribalness', and to engage in equally complex manipulations of culture to try to match these unknown criteria.

One of the most extreme examples of this dynamic emerged in the form of a debate about consuming mouse meat (*uyu ko cici* in Thangmi, *musa ko masu* in Nepali).²³ Many BTWA members who

had been born and bred in Darjeeling remembered an apocryphal tale told by their grandparents, which held that Thangmi in the homeland used to eat mouse meat as a staple food. Although homeland Thangmi may have occasionally eaten mouse meat, any consumption of it was due to poverty (and is a desperate measure taken by members of other ethnic groups as well in hill Nepal), rather than because eating mouse is a marker of Thangmi cultural identity. Any Thangmi family who has other food sources stays conspicuously away from mouse meat, while homeland Thangmi continue to eat beef, a consumption practice that was clearly an act of resistance within Hindu Nepal.²⁴ This shows that Thangmi have no problem maintaining unpopular consumption practices if they choose to: eating mouse meat is not an identity marker, whereas eating beef clearly is an expression of an alternative, non-Hindu identity. Despite all this, the most militant BTWA activists have begun a campaign to convince Darjeeling Thangmi to 'return' to eating mouse meat as a means of expressing their 'true' cultural identity. Moreover, having such a distinctive food item—which the Thangmi in India do not otherwise have, in part because beef-eating is not taboo in Darjeeling, which prevents it from being the distinctive marker it is in Nepal—would allow the group to participate in an annual government-sponsored ethnic food festival, giving them an opportunity to demonstrate their cultural uniqueness in a high-profile forum.

The BTWA directive to begin eating mouse meat angered both the Darjeeling lay Thangmi population and the migrant Thangmi population from Nepal, but for different reasons. The former group could not see the point of doing something they had never done before in the name of 'culture', particularly since nowhere did the Government of India clearly state that having a distinctive cuisine was a necessary prerequisite to being listed as an ST. The latter group, who in many cases may in fact have eaten mouse or other undesirable foods in their home villages during periods of food scarcity, found the idea insulting because it reminded them of the abject poverty they had left behind and undercut any upward economic or social mobility they might have attained in Darjeeling. The topic continues to be at the centre of lively debate throughout the Darjeeling Thangmi communities, with some activists promoting the idea actively, although no one has yet seen any of them preparing mouse curry themselves.

Another central BTWA campaign is the search for an indigenous Thangmi script. Although it seems counter-intuitive to think that a group would need to demonstrate its own writing system in order to qualify as a ‘tribal’ group, many Darjeeling Thangmi are convinced that they must discover evidence of such an orthography to include in their ST application.²⁵ BTWA activists are engaged in searching for ‘evidence’ that they once had a script, which has since been lost. Again, this agenda item raises eyebrows in the Thangmi homeland community, particularly among shamans who believe that the very fact that they have no written tradition is a central aspect of their distinctive identity. Thangmi shamans tell a story about how at the beginning of the world, all ethnic groups were given their own *veda*, or written scriptures. Hindus and Buddhists used theirs as religious books, as intended, but the Thangmi were so hungry that they simply devoured their *veda* on the spot. From that time onwards, they had only an oral tradition. To this day, the lack of a written tradition is central to homeland Thangmi identity constructs, which categorize Hindus and Buddhists together as groups with literate traditions in opposition to groups like the Thangmi who have no texts (for this reason the Thangmi do not see themselves as at all akin to the Tamang, many of whom use Tibetan texts in their ritual practice). Once again, Darjeeling Thangmi manipulations of culture for political purposes are at odds with the homeland Thangmi understanding and practice of it.

On a more pragmatic level, the BTWA has decided to undertake the thorough documentation of Thangmi cultural practices on video—‘videoalizing’, in local parlance. The intention is to create a video archive of key Thangmi life-cycle and calendrical rituals as practised in Darjeeling to show to government officials as part of the group’s application for ST status. As of early 2005, a series of *mumpra* (Thangmi death rituals) had been thoroughly videoalized, as well as a few *nwaran* (Nepali birth rituals) and *deopaloke* (Thangmi rituals to propitiate territorial deities). The one glaring omission was the *bore* (Thangmi wedding ritual), which the BTWA had found impossible to videoalize. Why? Because Darjeeling Thangmi stopped conducting weddings in a traditional manner long ago and instead followed a generic Hindu wedding procedure. Since a video of such a wedding could not possibly be presented as evidence of Thangmi indigeneity and cultural uniqueness, they were holding out for someone to do a traditional wedding, and pinned their hopes on

the migrant labourers from Nepal who might know how to do one. But when two migrant workers from Nepal were married, the ritual turned out to be much the same, and the BTWA leadership realized to their dismay that even weddings in the Thangmi homeland area had already been substantially Hinduized.²⁶ The video was worthless for ethno-political purposes, and the activists were at a loss. As of mid-2005, they were confused about how to proceed and were considering staging a 'dramatization' of a traditional Thangmi wedding to videalize for the purpose of submitting with their ST application.

After the wedding debacle, the BTWA leadership castigated the migrant Thangmi from Nepal for not maintaining their 'traditional' culture. This angered the migrant Thangmi community, as it was fairly clear to them that the BTWA was more concerned with using their performances of 'culture' to gain political benefits for themselves as Indians rather than to 'preserving' that culture and/or helping the migrant Thangmi population. This was also the case in November 2004 during the Tihar/Dipawali celebrations when, as in past years, the BTWA sought out several Thangmi from Nepal to perform *deusi* songs (in a mix of Thangmi and Nepali) at a fund-raising event. As I observed the event, the power dynamics between the BTWA members who were orchestrating it and the performers from Nepal were clear; afterwards many of the latter group told me that they were fed up with performing songs and dances, which for them were integral to Thangmi identity, in order to raise funds for an organization that rarely took any interest in their basic welfare, and instead spent the funds manipulating cultural knowledge from Nepal for political gain in India.

CONCLUSIONS

This ethnography returns us to the propositions with which I began this chapter. First, the Thangmi agenda in Nepal focuses on basic rights and social welfare precisely because cultural practice, in the form of syncretic ritual, remains at the core of their identity and cannot easily be 'preserved' in discursive terms, nor is there much to gain by doing so within the national context of Nepal; by contrast, the Thangmi agenda in India does the opposite by focusing on cultural preservation precisely because, not being active cultural practitioners themselves, they can only express identity in discursive terms, and

in fact must do so in order to make claims on the Indian state. Second, these different emphases derive in large part from the respective absence and presence of a reservations system in each country, as well as other differences in conceptualizing and experiencing ethnicity in each national context. Finally, despite their differences, the two communities are continually learning from each other and are in fact dependent on each other in the feedback loop process.

From the perspective of many Thangmi in Nepal, cultural preservation in the form of the performances I described earlier and their videoalization is pointless until basic rights and living standards for the group in their homeland areas are ensured. But without a reservations system in Nepal, there is no structure within which to agitate for these rights on the basis of culture at a political level. Instead, Thangmi stand to gain the most by working within the international development paradigm dominant in Nepal to agitate for improved living standards and basic infrastructure, on the basis of their poverty and history of exclusion from state resources. This process was initiated by the Janajati Empowerment Project (JEP), funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) Enabling State Programme, to the tune of £1.52 million over three years, beginning in 2004. Under this rubric, the NTS began receiving regular cash infusions to collect baseline information about Thangmi livelihoods and to begin implementing district-level projects for their improvement.²⁷

Some of Nepal's prominent ethnic activists have expressed reservations about the wisdom of turning ethnic organizations into development providers in this manner, since it may distract them from their original activist agenda of transformation at the state level (Bhattachan, 1995). Instead, such critics argue, groups like NTS should be busy fighting for the introduction of a reservations system in Nepal. But with the comparative knowledge of how the Indian Thangmi situation has panned out under the reservations regime, the NTS leadership is understandably hesitant to adopt such a platform. A reservations system in Nepal might require Thangmi to begin manipulating cultural practice as their Darjeeling counterparts have had to, and this would make NTS activists even more unpopular in the homeland areas than they already are. Engaging in the discourses of development and basic rights are already big steps, but require activists to deploy only statistics showing Thangmi poverty and low

educational attainment, not the outright manipulation of cultural practice that the political discourse of reservations might. At the same time, however, the relatively high profile of the Darjeeling Thangmi activists and their emphasis on the value of culture has increased Thangmi confidence in Nepal that such claims can in fact be made successfully and are worth fighting for at the national level—even if their content and context is different in Nepal.

Back in Darjeeling, there are no such international development funds available to the BTWA; India is a strong and functioning state in a way that Nepal is not, and in general does not invite International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) to provide basic infrastructural services, as Nepal does.²⁸ In this context, the BTWA is limited to working within the political discourse mandated by the state framework of reservations. Gaining ST status is contingent on being able to demonstrate a unique and very much alive, yet simultaneously ‘traditional’, culture. The Thangmis in India rely upon the Thangmis from Nepal for the cultural content on which they base their political claims. However, their emphasis on so-called ‘cultural preservation’, which could perhaps more accurately be called ‘cultural manipulation’, threatens to alienate migrant workers from Nepal and other homeland individuals who possess it.²⁹ In sum, the form in which Thangmi ethnic identity is expressed in India is dictated by the state-specific reservations system, but the content therein relies entirely on cultural practices (many of them syncretic and hybrid) that originate and are maintained in Nepal.

The BTWA leadership seems to recognize at some level the potential conundrum of over-instrumentalizing Thangmi identity: if they mute the sources of practice with too much discourse too soon, the practices themselves might die out, and with them the original content from which the discourse derived. In the next few generations there may be a real possibility of this happening, as publications and cassette tapes produced in Darjeeling that advocate certain forms of politically expedient cultural practice to the exclusion of others make their way back to Nepal. Over the last year, several young Thangmi living in Nepali villages have told me that they are very impressed with the Darjeeling materials, from which they had learned new details about how Thangmi culture ‘should’ be practised, which they hoped to follow themselves in the future. On the one hand, it would indeed be ironic if these changes occurred in the name of

‘cultural preservation’ for the purposes of gaining an ST reservation, but on the other, they might just be the natural result of a dynamic feedback loop in process.

NOTES

1. This chapter is based on research conducted in 1999–2000 funded by a Fulbright Fellowship and in 2001–05 by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Additional funds were provided by the Department of Anthropology and the Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell University. This chapter represents an early version of work that I continued to develop with funding from the Social Science Research Council in 2005–07, and which now comprises the core of my doctoral dissertation (Shneiderman, 2009). I would like to thank David Gellner for encouraging me to publish this piece as it stands, and for providing useful editorial advice. I thank Bir Bahadur Thami and Mark Turin, as well as the members of the Nepal Thami Samaj and the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association, for their invaluable support and contributions to my research. Finally, I thank Kathryn March, David Holmberg, and Viranjini Munasinghe, all of whom have influenced my thinking in crucial ways over time.
2. Thangmi is the indigenous ethnonym used by members of the group to refer to themselves in the Thangmi language. *Thami* is the Nepali derivative which is used in official documents and most literature on the group. I generally use ‘Thangmi’, except when referring to ethnic organizations that use the term ‘Thami’ in their title, or citing other writings on the group which use this term.
3. Here I use ‘discourse’ to describe the aspects of identity *construction* concerned with representation on the political level, and ‘practice’, to refer to the aspects of identity *production* encoded in action (often ritualized). My usage of these terms and exploration of their interlinkages refers to Sherry Ortner’s (1996) call for a rapprochement between analyses that emphasize ‘making’ culture in the productive sense, and those that emphasize ‘constructing’ culture in the discursive sense within arenas of power.
4. The situation in Nepal is changing rapidly, with prospects for affirmative action under active debate by the constituent assembly elected in April 2008. Here, I cannot do justice to the political transformations that have occurred either in Nepal or in Darjeeling since this chapter was originally written in 2005. Interested readers may find more relevant details in Middleton and Shneiderman (2008).
5. In a small survey of several extended Thangmi families that included approximately 300 individuals, I found that almost 75 per cent of marriages did not practise ethnic group endogamy. This calls into question the whole notion of an ‘ethnic group’ and is worthy of further discussion itself, but that is beyond the scope of this chapter. These liberal attitudes towards inter-group marriage seem to have evolved in the migrant context where choice of marriage partners was limited, the rigid legal system that enforces caste in Nepal was absent, and assimilation to a pan-Nepali *jati* identity that downplayed individual group identities was viewed as one of the keys to social mobility.

6. Organizations based on ethnic identity had been present in Darjeeling since the mid twentieth century, but these were at least initially conceptualized as *cultural*, rather than *political* organizations. Within the hegemonic frame of Nepali nationalist politics in Darjeeling, such organizations were expected to act as component parts of the pan-Nepali movement, communicating the values of *jati* improvement (cf. Onta, 1996, Chalmers, 2003) to their members at the local level, but they were not expected or encouraged to have direct dealings with the state on an individual basis. In the Thangmi case, the organization was almost entirely defunct during the period of the Gorkhaland agitation, and was only fully reconstituted in the early 1990s in the wake of the Mandal Commission.
7. The 2001 Nepal census records 22,999 Thamis. Detailed census work conducted by a Dolakha-based NGO, as well as my own field surveys conducted with Mark Turin, show beyond doubt that this is a serious underestimation. The low official number is probably a result of both self-misrepresentation by Thangmi individuals who claim to be members of other ethnic groups, and poor census-taking practices.
8. See Turin (2006) for details of the Thangmi language.
9. This is not to say that members of these groups do not themselves feel marginalized from access to power. For example, Ben Campbell shows how Tamang songs describe “their condition of political and economic marginality” as “born in the middle ground, weak, unclothed, and hungry” (1997: 215). From a Thangmi perspective, however, Tamangs appear to be comparatively well organized at the national level and further along in the process of achieving appropriate recognition from the state. A Thangmi colleague who attended the first international Tamang conference in Kathmandu held in 2002 told me that he was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of attendees and the Tamang leadership’s capacity to make convincing political speeches, both accomplishments which he felt it would take many years for the Thangmi organization to match.
10. The first Thangmi organization in Nepal was founded in Dolakha district in 1981 within the framework of party politics rather than that of ethnic rights. Due to political in-fighting, corruption, and the lack of a settled Thangmi population in Kathmandu who could raise the community’s issues at the national level, there was not a coherent central ethnic organization until 1999.
11. See Shneiderman (2002, 2005) for more details on death rituals and inter-ethnic rituals, respectively.
12. I follow Shaw and Stewart’s (1994) definition of syncretism as “the politics of religious synthesis”.
13. For example, the meeting of the Thangmi forefather, Yapati Chuku (Ya’apa), and foremother, Sunari Aji (Sunari Ama), on opposite sides of a river as they came from different directions; the union of one of their daughters with a Newar king, which produced one of the still-dominant clan lines; and the division of all Thangmi into two super-clans, Lhasa (after the Tibetan city) and Kasi (after the Indian city, Varanasi). These last categories are not unique to the Thangmi, as many of the Rai/Kiranti groups also use the terms Lhasa and Kasi *gotra* (Martin Gaenszle, personal communication).
14. It is important to note that Thangmi individuals have long been interested in making other kinds of claims on the state. Their participation in the Maoist insurgency, as well as in mainstream political parties, demonstrates their active

political engagement (see Shneiderman, 2003; Shneiderman and Turin, 2004). However, many are not particularly interested in instrumentalizing their *ethnic* identity for such purposes, and in fact when involved with national political movements, they often misrepresent themselves as members of other better-known groups.

15. Again, this situation has changed substantially since 2005, largely in response to the broader political transformation in Nepal that has made the prospect of ethnic federalism a real possibility. However, the description here stands as an accurate depiction of the disaffection with ethnic politics that I observed among many rural Thangmi in Nepal between 1999 and 2004.
16. In the 1909 *Linguistic Survey of India*, George Grierson states that there were 311 Thangmi speakers living in the Bengal Presidency, broken down into 9 in Jalpaiguri, 264 in Darjeeling, 6 in Chittagong, and 32 in Sikkim (Grierson, 1909: 280). While the accuracy of these figures is debatable, the important point is that there was already an established Thangmi-speaking population in India over 100 years ago.
17. This figure is an estimate based on detailed census information collected by the BTWA since 2003; however, their survey is ongoing and is therefore difficult to verify. A survey conducted by the Darjeeling municipality in 2004 identified just over 4,500 Thangmi residents within the limits of the urban municipality alone, which suggests that the BTWA numbers of 8,000 for the entire district are reasonable, since many Thangmi live in rural areas.
18. Some of the more militant Darjeeling activists have recently begun advancing the argument that the Thangmi originated in India and that only a small group migrated to Nepal, whose descendants then returned to India. Those making this argument feel that claiming Indian indigeneity will strengthen their case for Scheduled Tribe status, but it is unpopular among the lay population who feel intuitively that it is untrue and moreover that it belittles their emotional attachment to a pan-Nepali national identity.
19. It is difficult to come by historical information about individual ethnic organizations in Darjeeling without doing detailed primary research in the privately held archives of those organizations and their successors. At present, I have only been able to do this for the Thangmi. Citing sources published in Japan and Sikkim that I have not seen, Makito Minami suggests that several other organizations were founded during the same period: "Ethnic movements among Nepali migrants to Darjeeling began in the years between 1920 and 1940, when the Kirantis, Newars, Damais, Viswakarmas (Kamis), and Tamangs, all formed their own ethnic/caste associations. According to Kano (2001: 247), the Sherpa Buddha Association was established in Darjeeling in 1924, while a Limbu association called Yakthung Hang Chumlung was founded in Kalimpong in 1925 (Subba 2002: 9). The Mangars also formed the Mangar Samaj Darjeeling (Mangar Society Darjeeling) a little later in 1939" (2007: 490). A comprehensive history of such ethnic organizations in Darjeeling is an important area for future research.
20. On the level of national identities, Indians are widely disliked and disparaged in Nepal.
21. The Census of India has not yet released disaggregated figures for OBCs in West Bengal state in 2001. The 2001 census did show that of the total population

of West Bengal, 23 per cent were SC, while 5.5 per cent were ST. In Darjeeling District, 13 per cent were SC and 11 per cent ST. This shows that approximately a quarter of the population at both the state and district level were already classified as SC and ST, and we can assume that an equal or greater number were classified as OBC. Joanne Moller states that OBCs constituted 37 per cent of Uttar Pradesh's population in 1994, and the number might be similar in West Bengal (Moller, 2003).

22. The criteria for tribal status are stated in the 1965 Lokur Committee report, as cited in Middleton and Shneiderman (2008): (a) indication of primitive traits, (b) distinctive culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large, and (e) backwardness. However, there is no government publication that makes these criteria apparent to aspirant groups, and Darjeeling activists on the whole do not know about this report's existence. (I am indebted to Townsend Middleton for these details.)
23. Literally this should be translated as 'rodent meat', since it can include all types of rats and mice, but for simplicity and to match the BTWA's English term of choice I have chosen to stick with 'mouse meat'.
24. See Ogura (2007: 452, 473) on beef-eating among the Kham Magar, a practice appropriated by the Maoists. Nepal officially became a secular state in 2006.
25. This belief may have to do with the success of the Limbu in gaining ST status. As one of the few Himalayan groups with a distinctive script, the influential Limbu leadership has strongly emphasized the idea that a unique script is a key marker of tribal identity.
26. There remains a distinctive Thangmi cycle of songs that is sung at different points in the engagement and wedding process, but there was no one in Darjeeling who knew them well enough to perform them at the time.
27. JEP has now been superseded by JANSEEP (Janajati Social and Economic Empowerment Program), a project funded by CARE-Nepal to support three 'highly marginalized Janajati' groups, including the Thangmi. Starting in June 2007, this five year project has cast itself as a 'rights-based' project, in explicit opposition to the 'livelihood-based' approach that has previously dominated development work in the Thangmi area. I intend to focus on this project and its broader implications in future work.
28. In addition, the government of India's rejection of the term 'indigenous' at the policy level prevents activists from directly accessing the wealth of resources available to 'indigenous peoples' through the United Nations and several large INGOs in Nepal, which explicitly recognized the rights of 'indigenous peoples' in the 2002 National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act.
29. The NTS leadership is only slightly more sympathetic to the BTWA objectives than the average village Thangmi. Although the relatively educated NTS members are more familiar with the potential value of manipulating culture to suit ethno-political discourse, they are already concerned enough about being criticized by their own rural base, and have learned from experience that this is what will happen if they talk too abstractly about 'cultural preservation', instead of bringing concrete benefits to Thangmi villagers.

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