



Institute for  
Social Anthropology

Centre for Studies in Asian Cultures  
and Social Anthropology



**OAW**  
Austrian Academy  
of Sciences

ISA RESEARCH FORUM

## **Problems and aspects of social belongingness and collective identity construction in Sikkim (eastern Indian Himalayas)**

Mélanie Vandenhelsken

Thursday, 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2010, 16.00 pm [s.t.]

**ÖAW Building Wohllebengasse**, Seminar room 3  
A-1040 Vienna, Wohllebengasse 12-14

Sikkim is a newly integrated State of India (annexed in 1975), where the Indian programme of "compensatory discrimination" - the local form of affirmative action - adapted and was adapted to the existing ethnic frontiers and interethnic relations, mainly between what has now become the minority of ancient leaders, a Buddhist group of Tibetan culture, and the other groups, which main part is still considered as immigrants from Nepal. This situation raises questions regarding the political construction of "ethnicity" - understood here not from the essentialist viewpoint, but mostly from a constructivist angle - and more generally, the various dimensions of belongingness in this multi-cultural margin of India, which politicises the ethnic groups. The main theoretical tools ("ethnicity", "ethnic conflicts", centre versus margin versus frontiers conceptual relations, etc.) will be discussed as highlighted by preliminary ethnographic data.



**MÉLANIE VANDENHELSEN** studied anthropology at the Universities of Nanterre and Montpellier. She resided several years in Sikkim since 1996 for fieldwork and a research for the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (Gangtok, Sikkim). She also taught at the University of Lille. Her PhD (2002) was on the present form of an ancient monastic estate in West Sikkim in the frame of an analysis of the local relationships between religion and politics. She recently started a FWF research project entitled "ethnicity in Sikkim" at the Institute for Social Anthropology in Vienna.