

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Mona Chettri

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Dr. Mona Chettri, where I ask her: what's life like in the eastern Himalaya? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness, I am so excited for today's episode and also, by the way, I've interviewed people in Australia when I was in Australia, but I don't know that I've ever interviewed someone for Getting Curious while I was in the states and they were in Australia. So without any further ado, welcome Dr. Mona Chettri, who is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Western Australia. She researches the intersections of development, gender, politics, and environmental transformation in the eastern Himalayan borderlands of India and Nepal. OK, Dr. Chettri, do you want me to call you Dr. Chettri? Mona? How do you want me to call you for the rest of our gorgeous time together?

MONA CHETTRI [00:01:00] Mona is fine. Even Mo is fine. My friends call me Mo.

JVN [00:01:03] Oh my gosh. One of my closest friend's names is Monique and we call her Mo. So I love that story. I also call her Mookers. But I'm going to call you, Mo, and I'll keep it professional.

MONA CHETTRI [00:01:13] My friends call me Momo. Momo is also good.

JVN [00:01:15] Aw, that's so cute! And you're coming to us live from Perth, right?

MONA CHETTRI [00:01:21] Yes, absolutely.

JVN [00:01:22] And before we started recording, you said that it was very hot over there right now.

MONA CHETTRI [00:01:27] Yep, yep, it's been a crazy summer of intense heat. While it's been floods on the East Coast, on the West Coast, it's been just really hot, hot, hot summer. But tomorrow it's going to be cooler, apparently, can't wait for it to be tomorrow already.

JVN [00:01:43] So you'll have to go to that turquoise beach that I went to! Cottes-, Cottes- [CROSSTALK] Cottesloe! That beach was next level. So pretty.

MONA CHETTRI [00:01:52] It is, and the sunsets are amazing, to die for, in Western Australia. That's, the, one of the most beautiful things ever. It is, it is gorgeous.

JVN [00:02:00] And that, like, that turquoise water. I'm, like, obsessed with turquoise water. And it was really, like, a cool shade of water. OK, but we're, this is not what we're talking

about today! We're talking about something that is so interesting. I talk about this a lot on Getting Curious, I come from, like, a cornfield like, a small town of, like, 30,000, 40,000 people. The Himalaya mountains felt like 15 worlds away and, like, something that I only read about in the news, but I didn't really ever understand and I'm so curious about the history and contemporarily, like, what's going on? Which could you be any more qualified to talk to us about this? My word! So can you start off with just letting us know: where are the eastern Himalayan borderlands in the first place?

MONA CHETTRI [00:02:43] I'll try my best to answer your questions because it's quite an expansive sort of a space in terms of geography and in terms of history and of course, in terms of contemporary politics and what's going on and development, etc. But I will try my best.

JVN [00:02:57] And Mona, just to take the pressure off you, queen. This is very, like, you know, you're, like, a literal expert, like, a literal doctor in this. We're talking, like, junior high level. We're talking, like, like, year eight entry level. Like, you don't have to like— we're , we're brand new over here on Getting Curious. So just to start: where are the eastern Himalayan borderlands?

MONA CHETTRI [00:03:16] This is really great that, you know, that you're curious about it because I was curious about why are you curious? Because no one seems to be curious about where we are. You know, a lot of the time, it's mostly just Nepal that people are interested in. Where we come from, where I come from, it's the eastern Himalaya, which stretches from eastern Nepal, then into parts of India, then parts of Bhutan, and then, like, an extended part of the northeast India, the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Of course, in academia, you know, there's never a sort of a consensus on where one begins and one ends. So a lot of people also consider, like, you know, the eastern Himalaya extends all the way to other parts of northeastern India and then towards Myanmar. But the area that I study is eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling. Have you heard of Darjeeling, the Darjeeling tea? [CROSSTALK] And then Bhutan.

JVN [00:04:10] The countries that encapsulate, like, the eastern Himalayan borderlands, could, like, are parts of India, Bhutan, Nepal.

MONA CHETTRI [00:04:19] And, and also China, you know, like, or the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the TAR, parts of it can also be considered eastern Himalayas. These are all political borders, but if you think of it in terms of geography, it's the same mountain region. The mountain is stretched. And it's not just the mountains, it's the valleys and the plains also that make up the eastern Himalayas. The idea of borders in that region comes with the British, because the British cannot handle that there is no hardcore border, right? Like, you know, the villagers one day, like, say, "Well, this is a part of Bhutan." The next day, they'll be, like, "Oh, we're a part of Sikkim," right. These are very liminal spaces, and it's, like, it's just, like, you know, the British are, like, "Oh my God, what is going on here? So we need to make sure that we have borders, like, hardcore borders," and so that's when it starts to come into the region,

that's when borders come. And so this is like, starting in the late 18th and early 19th century and then towards the early 20th century, we see solidification of, of the British being there in the region permanently.

JVN [00:05:23] We also got to do this fierce episode of Getting Curious about, like, not ancient Chinese history, but, like, early Chinese history. And one thing we learned there was that it was, like, it was, like, much smaller than what is, like, contemporary, like, mainland China. So prior to the British, what was happening, like, in eastern Himalaya, like, before they came?

MONA CHETTRI [00:07:42] The thing is, we like to think in terms of history, in terms of dates and things like that, right, specific dates. But what we've also got to understand is that a lot of the time, no one was actually writing these things down. Right. So a lot of our history is actually oral history. Right. So that's just a thing to keep in mind when we talk of, you know, specific dates, especially, you know, historical dates. "This was the date of coronation," because a lot of the times what we find out is also that, you know, a lot of it is manufactured, right? So that's just something to keep in mind, especially in the context of cultures that have had only oral history. So before the British came, if we were to, like, look at the history, the sort of, "what we know, or what we read," and because just like you, I, I, I learned about Sikkimese history or the history of eastern Himalayas only after I left Sikkim, because I'd never studied that in school or anything. And the history that we study is mostly of the kings. So, "Which king came after this and that," right? So we never learned a lot of the social history. But what was going on there was that, yes, there were principalities, there were rulers, and then it was a feudal system. And there were different ethnic groups that were living there in Sikkim.

And of course, again, this is a tricky situation because a lot of politics, contemporary politics, is related to who was there first and who belongs to that space. So it's quite contentious to say "who was there technically first," right? But of course, according to history and oral history and written history, we had, like, Indigenous, a few Indigenous groups who are living there. The kings that we had in Sikkim, for instance, and the kings in Bhutan, also, they came to Tibet. Right. So there was a lot of cross-migration. There was a lot of family contact. There was a lot of religious connection. The Buddhism that, that came to Sikkim, Bhutan. It came to Tibet. Right. So these are interconnected that we have, and this is an important thing when we think of the region is that for a long time, we've been seen as remote and backward and very far away. But what has actually been going on is that we've had our own connections. It's a cultural crossroad. So our connections are more with Tibet, rather than with the Indian mainland, more towards the, the north and the east. And in contemporary times: our popular culture is more influenced by Korean pop. Right, it's K-pop, all of that is super, super big. And those are influences more than, you know, the regular South Asian influences. So that's really interesting in how this continues, even how these sorts of connections that we see way back in the past have transformed, but also, like, you know, are continuing in its own new, exciting forms.

JVN [00:08:39] Okay everyone, if you're not driving right now, I just encourage you to, like, if you can. I just, like, had to pull up a map because I was just, like, "Queen. I got to get all up in this map, like..." So interesting. I cannot even stand it, so cool.

MONA CHETTRI [00:08:54] So the British had their own agenda for different states. With Sikkim, for instance, it was an access to Tibet. So they wanted to open trade with Tibet. So the way—, so the colonization process was completely different there. It wasn't even, like, as it was in other parts of India. Darjeeling, for that matter, was actually, it used to be a part of Sikkim, but that was colonized for tea plantations. Right. So the history of British intervention, so you say, and colonization in the, in the, in the in that region is very varied and it depended on what the agenda of the British was at that time for that region. Another way colonization continues to live on in the region is through schools and educations and religion, actually. So a lot of Christian missionaries came into the region. They opened schools. And these were, like, and they're still very, very prestigious schools even now. So a lot of people want to send their kids to these sort of schools that have been opened by missionaries, right? So the legacy of colonization still continues to live there. And actually, our last queen was an American: Hope Cooke. She lives in the states. You've definitely got to meet her.

JVN [00:10:08] I don't understand how an American became a queen of somewhere and then didn't get super famous. We're obsessed with, like, someone who goes and becomes a queen.

MONA CHETTRI [00:10:14] Well, she was.

JVN [00:10:17] I hate it about myself, but I do love a little royalty moment. I hate it that I love it, but I do. I don't know what my problem is.

MONA CHETTRI [00:10:23] So there's a, there's a Nat Geo from March 1963, and it's all about the wedding of the royal family of Sikkim and Hope Cooke is there.

JVN [00:10:35] She's giving Brooke Shields.

MONA CHETTRI [00:10:38] Yeah, she was super, and she's here.

JVN [00:10:41] So now that I, and hopefully all of us, understand better, like, geographically where Sikkim, Darjeeling and then, like, East Nepal are, is, like, the UK, like, more popular in some places where they're, like, "Oh yeah, they did us a solid," in other places, they're, like, "I fucking hate them."

MONA CHETTRI [00:10:55] More than the place, I think it's about the group of people, right? Because of course, I'm sure the landowners, the feudal lords loved it because what the British enabled was migration of labor. They allowed and they not just allowed but enabled movement of people from eastern Nepal to come and work in the tea plantations and to work

as laborers in Sikkim and in other regions, right? So it's not about, like, the place which was, like, "Oh, we love the Brits," but it's more about class, which section of the society loved them more. The landowners, now they've got surplus laborers who have no rights, right? What happened with British colonization is the movement of people because of, you know, development, in that sense. So development of agriculture, whether it's agriculture in Sikkim, whether it's plantation economy in Darjeeling, right? So that allowed people to move in. So it's more of a class thing, even then. We don't talk about class in the region as much as we probably should be talking about class. But we talk more about ethnicity. You know, that's, that's, that's the most defining sort of feature for, you know, for us. I think that's more important than anything.

JVN [00:12:22] So in the eastern Himalayan borderlands between, like, Sikkim, Darjeeling, the east Nepal, what are some of the key, like, social and cultural and political features, like, of these places that we should be more aware of and talking about more when we're thinking about the eastern Himalaya?

MONA CHETTRI [00:12:41] It's very fascinating because I studied these three as a part of my PhD, and of course, it's a borderland where people of the same ethnic group live across borders. Right? And it's all cultural connections. So, you know, people celebrate the same festival, speak the same, like, similar language, same languages, etc., etc.. And of course, there's, you know, culture goes from one place to another. But what I found really interesting was that despite the similarities, the way we identify and as who we are and how we play out our politics is completely different. Right, so, for instance, just to give you an example, although there are Nepalis living on either side of the Nepal border, so the Nepalese live in Nepal, but there's a lot of Indian Nepalis on the living in India, in Darjeeling, right? But how we identify, who we are as citizens, of which country, our politics are completely different despite the similar ethnic and cultural connections. So you could have family in Nepal, but you would never say that you're Nepalese, you know, we would make sure that we'd be, like, "No, but I'm Indian Nepali," or that "I'm Indian Gorkha," or something like that, right? So in the borderlands, people choose certain identities based on their location of, of which country they belong to rather than choosing, "I belong to this ethnic group, so I should identify as that."

JVN [00:14:14] Is that because if that border got established and then there's, like, a gigantic mountain, it's, like, it creates, like, a physical distance or, like, is that why it becomes so like, you know, geographically-based and then the culture and the politics change between...

MONA CHETTRI [00:14:32] In terms of geography, it can be disruptive in places, but the politics is different. So even if there's no geographical sort of separation, even if it's one single plane, the politics is different because of what, how your relationship with the state is, you know. Because people belong to different states, people belong to different countries, and within those spaces, how does that state or that country treat you, right? And what benefits can you get? So it all depends on local politics.

JVN [00:15:12] I want to ask a question, but I'm scared that it's, like, stupid, but I think I'm going to ask. OK, so, cause is Sikkim its own country, or is it part of India... no? [CROSSTALK]

MONA CHETTRI [00:15:35] It used to be its own independent kingdom up until 1975, and we became a part of India in 1975, yeah.

JVN [00:15:45] Got air quotes.

MONA CHETTRI [00:15:47] So we, we, we merged with India in 1975.

JVN [00:15:52] It was a peaceful merger or, like, not a peaceful merger?

MONA CHETTRI [00:15:55] It was. It was a peaceful merger. But it also seems history is interesting because of its location, because if you look at the map again, we are right next. Like we stick out like a sore thumb and right next to China. Right? You know, China is on the top and then we've got Nepal on one side and Bhutan on one side. So the, the, the politics of that region has really got to do with the borders also. So how each country deals with its citizens, the especially people living in the borders, it's really got to do with the geopolitics of the region.

JVN [00:16:30] So you've got India is, like, a big power player in the geopolitics of the region. China is a big power player. And then what's Bhutan?

MONA CHETTRI [00:16:39] It's an independent kingdom, country, but it's also, like, Bhutan and Nepal are sort of a kind of similar situation because they are between two big, major regional powers. Right. So their alliances keep getting, like, stretched from one side to another, you know. And so it's very difficult for, I think, Bhutan and Nepal.

JVN [00:17:00] Now I'm getting more clear, now I'm getting clarity. OK, so Sikkim is part of India but still, it's own, like, independent, like historical culture because it like an independent thing. Bhutan is still it's own kingdom. And then Nepal's its own country. [CROSSTALK] And then Tibet is... what's Tibet?

MONA CHETTRI [00:17:18] China. [CROSSTALK] Yeah. Like, Tibetan Autonomous Region since 1952, I think, if I'm not mistaken.

JVN [00:17:28] But in the way that Sikkim is a part of India, Tibet's a part of China. But still has its own, like, rich, like, local and, like, cultural history.

MONA CHETTRI [00:17:36] Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So and Sikkim, it's, our rights are protected by, in the Constitution, right? So there's a special provision within the Indian Constitution where we can maintain our own laws, what is known as "old laws." And so it's related to

property tax inheritance. These sorts of things, like, who can come and live in Sikkim, who cannot. Who can buy property so we still maintain these checks and balances.

JVN [00:18:04] I feel like I really am getting it. I just that's what I meant when I said earlier where I was, like, "This is going to be real sixth grade entry," because, like, I am a nightmare and I need to learn, like, real basics before we get into, like, the really specific points or something.

MONA CHETTRI [00:18:18] It's also like, you know, like, no one talks about the—, and for me, this is why I think this is, like, really interesting, because a lot of the times there's very little that's known about the region. And what we do know is also, it's very romanticized. So a lot of the times it's just the mountains, the monks, the red panda that people know and talk about, which is there's nothing wrong with any of those things, but there's definitely so much more to that place.

JVN [00:18:52] I think now, I have, like, a better understanding of, like, a little bit of the history, a little bit of, like, the physical location of these places. How, how is it kind of now?

MONA CHETTRI [00:19:06] It's a very cool place. I'm biased because that's my home. But it's a space that's transforming really, really fast for because and one of the biggest reasons is that we've got better infrastructure and technology, right? So we are now connected to the world, so it's easier for the world to come to us. So it's a really great place and it's changing so fast, right? I think when we talk of colonization in the region, one thing again is that colonization doesn't end after the British leave in 1945. Right? So there's new types of colonization that continue to happen. So there's neo-colonization, right? But of course, you've got to think, you know, everything that the British bring is so that they can extract more from the place, it's to make their own lives easier. It's not for anyone else. So from there, what we see is that, you know, the society is changing a little bit. We see new ethnic groups coming into the region. There's increase in population of these places, right? And after the British leave, you know, we have a lot of Indian investments in the region and this is something again that's happened quite recently that we're seeing a lot of private companies coming into the region.

For instance, the tea plantations in Darjeeling used to be owned by the British. After the British left, it was Indian companies that came in, and they are the ones running the plantations, right? And in Sikkim now we see that for the longest time, we didn't have a lot of industries, but now we have a lot of pharmaceutical companies. We have hydro power. And one of the biggest changes, one of the biggest drivers of change in the region, across the region, actually, is tourism. Or "sustainable tourism," whatever that means. So yeah, so these are the things that are driving these changes. And it's I mean, I'm, I suppose I'm not doing a very good job of explaining this transition because this is a really long period of time in history. But from where we were and you know, where we were way back in the early 20th century to where we are now, it's phenomenal the changes that have happened, right?

And I think the ways to understand this place would be through urban development tourism. These are the things that are really driving the change and transformation of this place. And of course, migration, especially of young people out of villages, out of, you know, working in farms or working in the cities and especially of really young women who are migrating out, migrating to work in pharmaceutical factories or in retail shops and things like that. So these are the key things that are happening in this space, and it's happened within a very, very short period of time. For instance, my own grandfather, like, when he was working, when he was a young person, they didn't have any phones, they didn't have electricity. But within his own lifetime, you know, we've gone from having, you know, 24 hours electricity to having, like, you know, connecting roads and airport, like, all these sorts of things, mobile phones and things like that. And all of this happened in a really short, condensed period of time. Which, of course, then brings its own problems.

JVN [00:22:28] How do these political borders impact day-to-day lives, say in, like, the price or availability of goods or, like, interactions with local authorities and, like, obtaining those things?

MONA CHETTRI [00:22:39] So India and Nepal have a friendship treaty, so it's called the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, which means that people can come and go and work between these two countries freely. With Bhutan, it's also the same, it's quite easy, relatively easy to get into Bhutan. So the border itself, on a day-to-day basis, it is quite porous within India-Nepal and India-Bhutan, so it is quite easy to go back and forth. But I think when it comes to, like, when you start going to borders with China, when you start going up north, that's when it becomes more difficult and more contentious. Right. So it's quite difficult to access those spaces. For instance, you know, as a foreigner, if you want to go into Sikkim, you need not only a visa to India, but you need a special permit to go into Sikkim and even within Sikkim, there are only specific places that you can go to.

JVN [00:23:42] Was caste always a thing or it, like, became a thing, like, what's the deal with caste?

MONA CHETTRI [00:23:49] I don't want to undermine caste because caste is a part of an important, you know, an intrinsic part of Hindu society, right? But you've got to remember that, you know, we've got a whole group of people who are not Hindus, right? So they are Buddhists, they are Christians, they are animists, they follow their own Indigenous religions. So caste is an important part of Hindu structure and society, but probably for us in the region, for us, it's not as—, again, this is not to downplay it, you know, how caste structures social relationships, but it is probably not as prominent as in other parts of South Asia, I think. So yeah, it still exists, it still dictates who can marry, who you cannot, in whose house you can eat and things like that. But—

JVN [00:24:42] Really? [CROSSTALK] So caste has to, like, you can't, like, go to, like, somebody else's house if they're not in the same caste or whatever to go have...?

MONA CHETTRI [00:24:48] Some people can be really conservative about it. And then, you know, they would be, like, "Oh, you know, I will not drink water in your house or eat food in your house because you belong to a different caste."

JVN [00:24:59] Did the prevalence of caste within, like, Hindu culture, like, did that ever rub off on other people's culture or was it really kind of, like, very confined to Hindu people?

MONA CHETTRI [00:25:09] I think it's very confined to Hinduism. That's my understanding, my reading of the thing. And what has happened is a lot of people were so sick of this that that's where conversion to Christianity also comes in. Right, because Christianity doesn't recognize any of these things. And this is, this could be one of the reasons why there's a whole lot of conversion towards Christianity because Christianity is, like, "Jesus doesn't care about any of these sorts of things."

JVN [00:25:39] Also, like, the threat of burning in the fiery pits of hell for the rest of eternity is, like, also pretty convincing. You know, that really worked for me, at six, you know. I was, like, "Fuck, I don't want to, you know," and I still, you know, top secretly just because I am so scared. I'm, like, I'm not quite sure, but like if I was, like, falling out of a plane or something, like if I knew I would be like, "I'm sorry, girl!" [CROSSTALK] Like, I would, you know, like, yeah, like, you know, I would, I would probably feel like—

MONA CHETTRI [00:26:07] "I will do anything!" [CROSSTALK] "I'll go to church," you know? Yeah, that's really interesting. Also, you know, because for a lot of people again, this goes back to, like, oral culture history, because for a lot of people, you know, if God or what God is doing, it's not written down, it's all passed from, it's, it's from person to person. So for a lot of people, and this is what people have told me, the fact that there is a book, the Bible, that you can read, that tells you exactly what God is, what God is doing, what God did. For them, that gives them a lot of, you know, solace, you know, and support. They found, that's what they find attractive also about Christianity.

JVN [00:26:50] There's some scary stuff in there, though, honey, it's, like, a whole situation! So then so, like, what about, like, gender and sexuality? Like, how does that come into play? Like, we love to ask about gay stuff in other cultures. It's, like, one of my favorite things to learn about: gay stuff, queer stuff, like, is there any, like, gorgeous queer sexuality happening or, like, what's the deal?

MONA CHETTRI [00:27:14] I think so, I'm editing a book called "Gender, Sexual and Other Identities in the Himalayas" with this really fantastic bunch of researchers, young researchers from the region. Compared to other parts of, let's say, India, the region where we come from, the northeast, that bit of India where we are is seen as more free. Women have more opportunities and more freedom to do what, you know, doing, like study, go to work, choose to marry whoever you want to marry. So in that sense, there's also a lot of space, I think, for

different identities. Having said that, it's still a conservative place, right? So we do see this sort of scene emerging now, queer scene emerging right now, and it's really, really cool how really young people have so much courage to do what they want to do and to lead their authentic lives. And, you know, it's really cool to see that happening. But again, it's a very small section. And again, it's also people who have. I feel that my understanding is that people who are again slightly well-off, who have access to and the language of the internet. Right. So if you are savvy enough about how you present yourself and, you know, if you know the lingo, the language of, you know, of, of what the discussions are, conversations are, then you are kind of, like, fine and even celebrated. But I think for the everyday, average person, you know, who is trying to establish or find their own identity, it might be quite a different thing. So class is quite important in this.

JVN [00:29:00] So speaking of that and that, like, this area and also, like, do we say Himalaya or Himalayas?

MONA CHETTRI [00:29:09] Himalaya, I think. But I think, but I keep, but I keep seeing Himalayas and Himalaya and...

JVN [00:29:14] Are they both OK?

MONA CHETTRI [00:29:16] I would go, if you can, just say Himalaya, but I think I would—
[CROSSTALK]

JVN [00:29:22] I love it. No, I'm obsessed, I want to do the right thing. So, so, when it comes to speaking of like the eastern Himalaya and, like, speaking of, you know, different identities and how this part of, like, that you're talking about was seen as more free, but it's still kind of conservative. If we were to zoom out and look at society as a whole, how do one's overlapping identities, like, shape their experience? So, like, at the beginning, we were saying, like, "Well, you know, it wasn't really so much of, like, the state that you were in with colonization. It was, like, where you were in society," like, if you were a property owner, like, then you were really going to like it. If you are someone who is, they'd be more at the margins then you really weren't going to probably like it as much. So, like, in general, just to understand, I mean, I guess they could take a stab: is it cis het men who hold power?

MONA CHETTRI [00:30:08] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

JVN [00:30:11] So, shocker! Who else! [CROSSTALK]

MONA CHETTRI [00:30:14] Oh my god, like, of course. Like, "Who else?" Exactly. But it's really sad, you know? And this is what I feel, right? So for all of modernity and all education, and it's still men, you know, who make the decisions for us, who are still in positions of power, you know, and it's just it's really sad. Like? Of course, yes, you know, we are free to do

whatever we want to do. We are free to wear whatever we want to wear and do all of these things. But in terms of actually having political power and agency, it's still men.

JVN [00:30:45] Now is it, like, a governor or like a president who gets elected and then reports to India, like how does like, how does the politics work? Is that it?

MONA CHETTRI [00:30:55] So for Sikkim, we've got our own what we call the chief minister, which is, like, the premier of the state. It's a democracy, right? So we, we elect every five years we elect this person. But for, for a very long time, we've had the same, we *had* the same person. Like, the last chief minister that we had ruled for 25 years. So it was like, you know, it was, it felt a bit like an extension of the monarchy that was going on. But anyway, so the idea is that we elect people. It's a multi-party political system. So, you know, you can have as many political parties. And yeah, and then we, you know, that person then reports to in a sense or is accountable to the central government in India.

JVN [00:31:45] And has there ever been a woman elected to that or, like, in the cabinet or something?

MONA CHETTRI [00:31:50] Yeah. Not, like, to the main position of the premier or the chief minister. But of course you have to, by law, there is a certain proportion of people in the ministry or in the cabinet that have to be women. But this is the thing, this is my problem, is that it's very perfunctory. It's only like, "OK, you know, let's tick these boxes" sort of an exercise. You know, "Women, women are, we have to have maybe, let's say, five women in the government or whatever. So let's make sure we just do the bare minimum." But, you know, it's got to do with the kind of political system we have here, but it's also got to do with women and their interest and engagement with politics. They're just, they just don't want to do it yet.

JVN [00:32:37] Or is it, like, societally, like, it hasn't been encouraged? And so we know who is in power, usually. So who is at the margins currently in the eastern Himalaya, that needs more support?

MONA CHETTRI [00:32:52] I think, of course, women and people of, you know, other identities here. But I think also just the youth, the young people in that region need a lot more support, I feel, especially because they face a lot of unemployment, so there's a lot of unemployment and there's a lot of pressure. You know, being a young person is hard anyway, right? But if you add this whole idea of how you know you have to be successful and you have to have a job and you have to support your family and things like that, so it adds all these pressures that—, and then you don't have a lot of things that you can do. So this is what is also then leading to outmigration of young people, so whether it be from the villages to urban areas or from urban areas to bigger cities, we're seeing a lot of outmigration of young people. So yeah, apart from like, yes, of course, women and other minorities, I think young people need a lot of support and the creation of opportunities. I think if we want to stay in our place,

if we want to, you know, build that place, I think a lot more needs to be invested also in those places.

JVN [00:34:12] OK, so that actually leads us perfectly to where we're going next, which is, like, development in the region now. So we see that, like, out-migration is an issue. Lack of access to upward economic mobility is an issue. What other issues are people facing? Is it like? Is it transportation? Is that access to, like—, because you said earlier, like, for LGBTQ people, it's, like, if you have access to the internet, like, you need to have some sort of either, like, capital or, like, social capital, like some way to access these things, to get the savvy, to understand what's going on in the world. So is it just, like, access to information, like, is that kind of one of the main things that people are up against?

MONA CHETTRI [00:35:00] I think the big problem is because of the location, the geographical location, it's very difficult to establish anything, right? So to have big factories and things like that. Because for the longest time, people have been relying on agriculture and or on these tea plantations, no matter how exploitative, no matter how bad being it was people that relied on these sorts of things. But what is happening is that now a lot of young people who are gone to schools and colleges are now seeing, like, "You know what, we don't want to be doing that stuff. You know, we want proper jobs," right? So we want to move that. So one of the big problems is the lack of opportunities, the lack of availability of work itself in this region. And when work does get created, right, so for instance, we have lots of pharmaceutical factories in Sikkim. And this was a part of my research when a lot of when these factories came, the kind of jobs that became available to people and especially women was just working on the assembly line, which is just manual labor where you just become, like, the part of a machine, which does not actually have any opportunities for mobility, like upward mobility.

So the kinds of jobs that have also been created are not really great for people there. So it's not just about, like, information, but it's also the kind of jobs that are available. And just, like, education and the quality of education is also very important. It's good in some places, but it's not really great, right? So people go to school, they become, you know, they get literate, but are they actually educated or not? And in India, you know, like, you know, can you speak fluent English or not can be quite a deciding factor in what kind of jobs or whether you can be considered for a job or not, you know? So a lot of, you know, people that I know and people that you know, well, my friends from school, when they've finished high school, they went and worked in these call centers, right so because they could speak fluent English. So the kind of job and things become available that's also linked to the skills that you acquired, right?

JVN [00:37:21] Right. So is it safe to say that, like, in rural parts of the eastern Himalaya, it's, like, more agriculture-based work and then in urban areas or, like, more urban centers it's, like, there's, like, pharma factories, call centers. What else? What other types of jobs are happening in urban spaces?

MONA CHETTRI [00:37:42] So the pharmaceutical factories are, like, and more, like, outside urban areas because you can't have factories within urban but in periurban areas, really what is known as a periurban areas. But in the eastern Himalayas? Yes, agriculture is really, really important. But the thing that's really driving change and driving urbanization is tourism. Right. So everybody wants to go to exotic eastern Himalaya. And so the image is of the Shangri-La. The image is of exotic, hidden, wonderful, you know, blah blah blah. A sort of space, tourism is really, really important. And it employs, you know, people, locals as in hotels, in restaurants and as taxi drivers. And in some places as tour guides and things like that. And another thing is that's really important, that's also leading to urbanization and development is consumption, you know, is retail and consumption. There's heaps more shops that have opened up so many shops that have opened up that employ especially young women.

And this is a, this is again a good bit of my research that I did on young women working in these shops. Despite where we are, you know, everybody is extremely trendy and everybody's on point. So what is fueling this is actually cheaper, fake products that are, that are coming through the different borders, right? So one is either coming through China or it's either coming through Bangkok. So everybody's, like, really well dressed but consumerism is also driving migration because there are lots of shops opening up. And in these shops are, like, really young girls working. Right, so they're moving out of villages to come and work in these shops. And when they come to live in, you know, come to work in these shops, they need a place to live. So that's what's been driving urbanization.

JVN [00:39:45] What if someone goes to school in, like, a rural or urban place and they're, like, "Oh my God, I'm obsessed with school," like, is there college and, like, community college and stuff?

MONA CHETTRI [00:39:55] Well, we do have, education is, especially government-subsidized education is quite accessible, so you could go to, you know, and I know people and it is possible to actually go to government schools and colleges and to also do really well, you know, so that is possible also.

JVN [00:40:13] But it's, like, can you afford to even, like, can you afford to not make money for yourself or your family to do that for three or four years?

MONA CHETTRI [00:40:20] Yeah, yeah. And then of course, if you know, if you go to another city, another bigger Indian city, you know, just to study, of course, you get, you know, you've got, you've got better networks, you learn better things, you know, all these sorts of things. But having said that, I mean, you could still be in the, you know, you could still go to a local college or you could go to the local school or uni or whatever, and you can still be alright. But I think it's a, it's a, it's a decision that they have to make. "Do I study or do I work? You know? So what do I do?"

JVN [00:40:52] So, like, I was reading about, like, these, like, religious theme parks that are there, too? And, like, so between, like, the pharmaceutical factories, the religious theme parks, the hydropower projects, the retail and service industry, like, who is leading the charge on all of these development projects? And I'm assuming that whoever's leading the charge on those are the ones that's walking away with, like, the biggest profit.

MONA CHETTRI [00:41:16] Yes. Yes, and I could get into trouble. No, no, no. So who's leading? You know, you've got to understand that in, that in, in South Asia in general, the state is a very, very important tool, right, in terms of development. So everything is sort of state approved. Right. So whether it's in Nepal, whether it's in Sikkim, whether it's in Bhutan. Everything is controlled by the state. Having said that, what we are seeing now is a lot of private companies are also investing in the state. So the state, usually older, tends to act as a mediator. Right. But of course, everything has to be approved by the state. So if you want to build this major religious theme park or what I call "religious Legoland," and I'm going to go to hell for that. But that has to be approved by the state. So the state is a mediator, right? If you want to buy land to build these things, going to buy land to build parks, if you want to build land for hydro, the state has to mediate and, and and so it's, you know, so he talks to the landowners, but it also is representing the interest of private companies. So it's a, it's a, it's a very hybrid sort of relationship, but it's the state which is doing all of this supposedly for the benefit of the people.

JVN [00:42:45] We learned on an episode of Getting Curious about dam displacement and about, like, the effects that, like, hydropower can have on different areas. So the hydropower projects that you mentioned and then also, like, pharmaceuticals, I would imagine, you could have a lot of, like, waste or, like, runoff as a result of those, like, or is there any, like, negative impacts that these developments are having on the environment?

MONA CHETTRI [00:43:09] It's not good, but that's my personal opinion is that it's, it can be these sort of development can be done in a way that doesn't harm the environment because at the end of the day, we've got to ask, like, "Who is it benefiting, right, at the end of the day," is basically these private companies that are just extracting.

JVN [00:43:28] And where are these private companies from? Are they from India or are they from...

MONA CHETTRI [00:43:33] Yeah, it's all Indian private companies and they're not, like, you know, Chinese or whatever. It's not allowed, these sorts of investments, they're not allowed. And most of these, like all these private companies, are Indian.

JVN [00:43:46] Could those private companies have investors in them that are, like, American, Russia, like, whoever the, like—, cause if it's a private company, is there any way to even know exactly who is with it?

MONA CHETTRI [00:43:56] I think they have to be quite transparent about it. And in India, they've got quite strict laws about what percentage of which company can have private foreign investment. It depends. So they're quite strict about it. And what percentage is it, like, you know, "50 or 51 percent can be foreign investment" or not? So on the face of it, you know, it's, it's all Indian companies that are, that are coming in. And of course, there have been a lot of negative impacts of hydropower and pharmaceutical and hydropower is more sort of visible, right? It's really changed the landscape. We've got a river called the River Teesta, which drains the entire city. It's, it's basically now, like, a lake. It's become like a sluggish lake. And it's really the, it's really destabilized the, the land on the sides of the river and but also because of the tunnels that have been built.

What has happened is that it's really because the tunnels have been built, it's changed the, the groundwater level, right? So now springs are drying up because the water basically the water table has shifted. So you do a lot of drilling that shift the water table. The water that was supposed to flow in a certain way doesn't flow, right. So I've been to tunnels where it's basically just water is seeping from the roof of the tunnel because this is water that is supposed to have gone into a spring somewhere, but it's been diverted, right, so what this has done is, it's created water shortages and water problems for villages. So what that then means is that people can water their crops. They have to walk, I don't know, maybe, like, more for, you know, longer distances for water and things like that and. These are just like, you know, the things that I would like really just visible right now.

But, but I think I'm more concerned about the long term impact of hydro and what that's going to do to the region. And it's really scary because it's, we are a very earthquake prone region and we get heavy, heavy monsoon. And every year when it rains, it's really scary when you're traveling up the hills because you just don't know what might happen. Right. And pharmaceuticals are very insidious because you can see there what they're doing, right? But of course, it's a lot of toxic release of, you know, all these toxins in the, in the rivers and streams and a lot of women that I spoke to during my fieldwork, they also talked about health issues that they started experiencing after working. But of course, you know, it's all anecdotal and no one's actually done it like a, like a big survey to see if there have been any health impacts. But yes, so there's so many things that are going on. So this really begs the question. It's like it's development but development for whom and what is this development, right? Because who's benefiting from this? Because all we're seeing is just the destruction of our environment and our way of life.

JVN [00:47:00] How is that affecting the political and cultural formation of the East Himalaya? This dichotomy of this development and what it's doing to the people?

MONA CHETTRI [00:47:09] Well, sadly, it's, it's also, you know, a place which is, where there is a lot of poverty and there is a lot of hardship and struggle. So for a lot of the people, and a lot of the times, the question is, "Do I, do I have the luxury to think about environmental impacts or do I think about, you know, earning money?" So the choice is between, "Do I go and work

in the pharmaceutical factory and, you know, earn this money so I can feed my kids and send them to school? Or do I just say, 'This is a bad thing.'" So yes, on the one hand, you know, like, you know, you think that there should be more awareness, there should be more conversations around this and more political activity around this. But then, you know, I'm speaking from a position of privilege to say that we should be doing more of this because if someone is earning a livelihood from doing these things, who am I to say that this is a bad thing, right? So it's, it's a very difficult thing because on the one hand, yes, everybody knows that this should not be happening, but then you know, the people's livelihoods and lives attached to this. And again, this again goes back to the power of the state because if the state approves, then sanctions something, it's very difficult then to go against it, you know? So it's yes, of course, in an ideal world, you know, we should be protesting against all of these things that are happening, but it's more murky and it's very difficult to actually achieve these things.

JVN [00:48:49] So what do you see on the horizon for the eastern Himalaya and, and what's your hope for it?

MONA CHETTRI [00:48:57] What do I see on the horizon? I'm actually quite concerned, to be honest, because and I suppose, like, you know, this is probably because of my own bias, because I'm from there and seeing this, you know, just looking at the speed of transformation of the region, I am concerned about on an environmental level what is going to happen because we are urbanizing so rapidly, right, and there's so much pressure on the natural environment. So I am concerned about, like, "How far can we push this and how far can we push our hills, our mountains, right? How much can we extract before something happens, something really disastrous happens?" I'm concerned on that level and also I'm concerned about, like, "What is the future going to look like for the people, for the young people?" Like, what will they be doing right? What? You know, what kind of work will they be doing? How will they be making a livelihood? So I am concerned about that. But then again, I meet young people and then I interact with young people and then it gives me a bit of hope because they're so resilient and they're so creative that they're finding new ways of doing things, of expressing things and achieving things. You know, things, I suppose. Like my generation, we grew up thinking in a box, like, "You've got to do this, you've got a study, you've got to go to school, you've got to get a job, etc." But the young kids now are just, like, thinking of very, very creative ways in which they can, you know, lead the life that they want to, you know, and not just be bogged down by this very linear way of looking at things. So, yeah, so what do I hope? You know, I mean, I think it's a mixed emotion, I think for me. On the one hand, I am worried about what's going to happen, but I think there's a bit of hope looking at the young people from the region, I think we'll be alright.

JVN [00:50:57] So, love that. So you were, like, minding your own business, like, in college, you know, like, learning about things and then what initially drew you to the type of research that you have found yourself doing?

MONA CHETTRI [00:51:13] You know, I ended up becoming this researcher who does, who researches so many different kinds of things because from what I've researched in my PhD is very different to what I research now. But I never thought I'd be doing this, you know, I thought it would be a different life for me. But it was actually my experiences as an Indian Nepali in Delhi and the sort of questions that people had around my own identity and citizenship because they would constantly say to me, "Oh, are you from Nepal? Are you from Nepal?" Right? And I would be like, "No, I'm from Sikkim," and no one would know, like, where Sikkim is and would be, like, "Yeah, whatever," it is, these are these sort of experiences. And then you, you know, that led me into really interrogating. It started with who I am, and it's become more about the place where I'm from.

JVN [00:52:10] And then I'm sure you can answer this question better after the last hour that we've spent together. What misconceptions do you think people have about the borderlands, and about the eastern Himalaya and globally?

MONA CHETTRI [00:52:24] That's a big question. Misconceptions around borderlands, I think one of the biggest misconceptions around borderlands and it's not just about the eastern Himalaya but borderlands, in general, is people tend to think, when we talk of borderlands, people tend to think this specifically in terms of political borderlands, you know, but by, and, and as the periphery of the nation state, when we think of border, we think in terms of country, isn't it? But I think what we've got to do is we've got to, like, try and, like, realign how we think and not just think of borders as peripheries or the end of the nation state, but rather as a really interesting cultural spaces of cross connections.

JVN [00:53:13] Do you feel like, especially for the people who live along these borders, do you feel like they're more tolerant of the, like, like, if there's ever a fight but terror, like a political shake up generally and in between any of the political differences? Do you ever think that the people living on the border are, like, "Honey, that's, like, my cousin across the way. They're not like that!"

MONA CHETTRI [00:53:37] Yes and no. I think it depends on what's—

JVN [00:53:42] Very situational.

MONA CHETTRI [00:53:44] Yeah, yeah, it depends because it's, you know, this again goes back to what we talked about what an hour ago, I think about who we are and we you know which you know, which countries we belong to that really often does have an impact on how we identify ourselves. So where does my loyalty, my belonging, you know, where does it lie, right? So yes, of course, yeah, I've got, like, family and whatever. I went across the border. But if someone says something about Sikkim, I tend to be like, you know, I tend to be like, "Oh, we're way cooler than you people in Darjeeling or whatever." You know, it's, it's not like enmity does exist. But yeah, but I think, you know, which place we belong to has a really big impact on how we sort of respond to problems.

JVN [00:54:34] So Dr. Mona Chettri, what is next for you and for your research?

MONA CHETTRI [00:54:39] It's been two years since I've been able to go back home because of COVID, so I've embarked on a new research project here in Australia because I was, like, "Hmm, I can't go home for fieldwork, but my people are here." So I'm looking at Himalayan migrants working in regional Australia. So these are migrants from Nepal and also refugees from Bhutan who are working here, were living and working in regional Australia, usually in the health care sector, usually in cleaning and things like that. So that's my new project. I also want to keep continue working on gender and new labor in the eastern Himalaya because I think that's really, really interesting, right? Because what are young women doing in their lives? I'm very curious about that. But yeah, given COVID and whatever has happened in the last few years, I can't seem to plan beyond that, you know.

JVN [00:55:36] Any idea when you'll be able to get to go home and visit, and then be able to actually come back? Like, have they said anything about that because I heard that, like Western Australia was like the most lockdown of the lockdowns.

MONA CHETTRI [00:55:47] Yeah, we, we just opened up last week, so I should be able to hope I'm hoping to go back, like, in June or July. But it's always really scary with Australia because you just don't know when they might clamp down and say, "Well, don't come back." Right? So it's a bit, but it's been too long, you know, more than two years since I've gone back home. And I need to go and yeah, just be at home and eat!

JVN [00:56:15] Yeah, I was going to say, what's your, what's your favorite food? What's your favorite?

MONA CHETTRI [00:56:19] Oh my god, dumplings! I love, oh my God, I love it. I can't choose, I mean, you know, when I go back to India, when I go back home, I'm on this eating rampage. I'm just, like, uncontrollable. I will just...

JVN [00:56:35] I'm like that, too, when I go home. But I bet the food's not as good as yours. I bet it's, like, I yeah, I well, actually ours really good too we could, we could have a feast of, like, Midwestern fare and then some gorgeous, like, Eastern Himalayan fare together.

MONA CHETTRI [00:56:52] Yeah, but yeah, absolutely. I would love to. Well, you should come down to Perth, and when you come down to Perth, you should. We should hang out. [CROSSTALK] I mean, you are absolutely, absolutely.

JVN [00:57:02] Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious, Dr. Mona. We appreciate you so much for your time and for your research. I feel like I learned so many things, and thank you so much for coming in and Getting Curious.

MONA CHETTRI [00:57:12] Thank you so much for having me. This has been great, and it's really a great opportunity because we don't get any exposure in a sense, right? So this has been really great. Thank you for giving me this platform and it's amazing that we've been able to get it off the ground.

JVN [00:57:28] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dr. Mona Chettri. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.