

Book Reviews

Saubhagya Shah. 2018. *A Project of Memoreality: Transnational Development and Local Activism*. Kathmandu: Himal Books.

Saubhagya Shah's posthumously published book *A Project of Memoreality: Transnational Development and Local Activism* throws important light on the dynamics of women's activism at the local level in Nepal. Originally written as a PhD dissertation submitted at Harvard University in 2004, the book is an outcome of Shah's ethnographic fieldwork in Viman of Sindhuli district from late 1998 to early 2000. Intrigued by media reports of a women-led anti-alcohol movement in Viman in 1990s, Shah first arrived in Viman to see if the women's movement was provoked by the increasing production and distribution of alcohol across the country precipitated by the liberalization of the country's economy in the early 1990s. It soon dawned on him that the movement against alcohol was merely the tip of the iceberg. Women's activism in Viman was indeed multi-faceted and aimed to address various social issues that mostly affected local women. These largely illiterate women not only sought to improve their socioeconomic status but also to subvert the prevailing gender inequality through their collective action. Rather than succumbing to the traditional mores that subordinate women, how did the women of Viman come to take matters concerning them into their own hands?

Going beyond the conceptual limitations of a geographically delimited fieldwork, Shah locates the activism of Viman's women in a wider context appreciating the linkages between local, national, and global processes. In so doing, he highlights how local activism in Viman was shaped by national and transnational forces such as national politics, the development aid regime, and neoliberalism. Despite informing local processes with specific interests, these wider forces often fail to contain the activities spurred by them which can eventually have far-reaching and unforeseen implications. In the case of Viman's women, the impetus for their activism was initially provided by a development project launched by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in collaboration with Women Development Section (WDS) of the government in the early 1990s. The project aimed to improve the rural women's agricultural productivity by running several agriculture-related

programs. To that end, the project staff founded Mahila Karyakari in Viman by roping in the local women. Envisaged to be an intermediary group between the project staff and the local people, Mahila Karyakari however transformed itself before long from an instrument of the development project to an autonomous entity led by the local women in keeping with their interests.

Shah's work could also be read as an empirical account of how a development project actually unfolds on the ground. Though all external development interventions are made with specific plans and goals, every place has its own social characteristics, history, and a balance of power which significantly influence the project implementation process in unique ways. By focusing on the role of Mahila Karyakari in Viman, the book provides a crucial insight into the unintended consequences of the external intervention. The formation of Mahila Karyakari provided the local women a hitherto non-existent common platform whose scope, though defined by the development project, was expanded by local dynamics unforeseen by the funding agency. Going beyond its original mandate, Mahila Karyakari involved itself in a broad range of activities in Viman from mediating household disputes to helping out troubled women in availing justice. Though the external intervention inadvertently enabled the political agency of Viman's women, Shah faults the development agencies including the FAO for not taking into account the social and political dimensions of gender inequality in their planned interventions. As a result, the unintended consequences of their own interventions remain invisible to them as evidenced by the telling omission of these real consequences in the evaluation reports of the project implemented in Viman.

These unintended consequences of the intervention, as Shah explains, result from the interpenetration of the women's agency and the structural factors. To be sure, their attempts at challenging the culturally sanctioned female subordination in Viman could not have been possible without some agency at their disposal. However, their agency was also circumscribed by structural factors to the extent that the very conceptualization of the WDS-run programs was inflected by gender inequality ingrained in the larger structures. For one thing, it was only the married women in the area who could avail themselves of the WDS-run credit services and that too, only after obtaining the permission of their husbands. Moreover, the women activists in Viman had to make sure that their activities would not infringe upon the core interests of the powerful men and the local political parties

dominated by them. Otherwise, it was unlikely that they would succeed in their works. Regardless of the strategy adopted—be it collaborative or confrontational—the women’s collective action was invariably driven by their interests. Their activities therefore would apply substantial pressure on the patriarchal structures to soften or transform them over time. In this way, the book empirically illustrates how agency and structure are mutually constitutive without one being subordinate to the other.

The book is interspersed with intriguing reflections and anecdotes extracted from Shah’s field notes. Though the world of women and the world of men are often divided into the dichotomous realms of the domestic and the public, the activist women in Viman however straddled both the realms blurring the conventional boundaries between the two. This however did little to defuse Shah’s fieldwork predicament as a male anthropologist working with women. In one of the entries in his diary, Shah writes, “What do the men think of my access to women here?...Many men here don’t know me, but the women do, and when they see me in conversation with their women, what goes in their head?” (p. 31). As we can see in the book, this predicament hardly came in the way of his work as he himself notes on the last day of his fieldwork in Viman, “The feeling that my company was appreciated by so many *didi bahinis* here will mean that one requirement of my ethnography has been fulfilled” (pp. 31–32). The book contains some stirring anecdotes that demonstrate that the women’s activism in Viman was also operative at the symbolic level. For some, the women’s opposition to a priest’s interpretation of a story from *Śrīmad Bhāgavad Purāṇa* (that depicted a woman character unfairly) might appear quite unnecessary as the interpretation had no direct connection to Vinam women’s lives. Similarly, the foundation-laying ceremony of Mahila Bhavan performed by the women, not men as tradition would have it, might also appear unnecessarily subversive on their part. However, the women of Viman seemed aware that it was imperative to fight patriarchy at the symbolic level too in the cultural and ritual spheres if they were to secure their gains towards gender parity.

It has been rightly pointed out in the book that all women, irrespective of caste and ethnic background, experience patriarchal oppression in common though it may have differential manifestations in different cultures. The simple fact that the Mahila Karyakari’s activism received recognition, acceptance, and support in the multi-ethnic setting of Viman indicates that patriarchal oppression was a common denominator in every woman’s

experience, regardless of their background. One may recall that Hangen's (2010) ethnographic study of ethnic politics in East Nepal also reveals that female subordination is no less real for *Janajāti* women despite the contrary claims of the (male) *Janajāti* activists and politicians. However, as one could gather from Shah's ethnography, women's activism in Viman was largely led by upper-caste Hindu women. Odd as it may seem, Shah doesn't throw light on why this was the case in Viman. Shah appears uninterested in locating this state of affairs in larger historical and structural contexts that favor upper-caste Hindu women in leadership positions in the women's rights movement and its allied NGO sector in Nepal (Tamang 2009). While cultural differences did not stop Viman's women from coming together for a common cause, this collective endeavor across cultural boundaries was however mediated by pre-existing social and cultural hierarchies, eventually leading to cleavages along ethnic/cultural lines between the leaders and the followers. Shah clearly overstates the idea of "blurred boundaries" in the context of multi-cultural settings. It is often the state-patronized culture that prevails in multi-cultural settings in important ways, privileging the bearers of the culture in different spheres of life. Viman apparently was no exception—a nuanced discussion of which remains missing in the book.

Nonetheless, the book is a compelling read for it has been framed as a project extending beyond the instrumentalities of academia. As is apparent from the title, it was the project of "memoreality" in which Shah shared a collaborative relationship with his subjects, namely, the activist women of Viman who warmly invited him into their life-world. The women expected Shah to be the chronicler of their courageous deeds in Viman so as to transcend their own invisibility and ephemerality that characterize a woman's identity in Nepal's patriarchal society. Memoreality, according to Shah, is this desire to be known for one's socially significant works into the future even long after their physical departure from the world. The path to the future glory could only be secured by inscribing their works into historical memory. The women wanted to keep a name for themselves, as was evident in their discourse of *nām-rākhne* or name-keeping, and thereby inspire women in other parts of the country and beyond. Certainly, many of us wouldn't have known about these courageous women had their works not been inscribed in Shah's PhD dissertation which, fortunately, saw the light of day after its publication as a book. Shah did not want ethnography to be a one-way extractive undertaking with no relevance for the ethnographic subjects.

Rather, he believed in maintaining a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship between the ethnographer and his ethnographic subjects. Shah's work was evidently driven by such a collaborative spirit which also makes the book particularly exemplary in Nepali ethnography.

References

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