

Review Essay

TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF NEPALI SECULARISM

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David N. Gellner, Sondra L. Hausner and Chiara Letizia, eds. 2016.
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Even after the declaration of Nepal as a secular state by the constitution of 2015, contestations over various meanings and practices of secularism have not receded. Moreover, the constitutional explanation of “secular” itself is open to divergent interpretations. The phrase *sanātan dekhi caliāyeko dharma saṁskṛtiko saṁrakṣaṇ* (protection of religion and culture being practiced since ancient times) is seen as either a nod to *sanātan dharma* as Hinduism is orthodoxly known, or as inclusive of all indigenous religions of Nepal. Yet, even the more capacious second interpretation excludes Christianity and Islam as they are not seen as religions that have been handed down since ancient times in Nepal. During the transition years from 2006–2015, with a few major exceptions, scholarly studies of secularism in Nepal relied mostly on utterances of political leaders and activists, and discussions of models of secularism that emerged in different contexts across the world (Toffin 2006; Letizia 2011, 2013). Ethnographic case studies rarely informed the secularism debate. *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal*, an edited volume by Gellner, Hausner and Letizia, therefore, is a welcome contribution that tackles the question of secularism in Nepal with lucidly written and ethnographically grounded case studies.

The book grew out of a workshop organized in July 2012 by the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford. The workshop brought together scholars from different disciplines to consider

questions related to the state of religious practices in Nepal after the end of the Hindu monarchy and a formal declaration of the secular state; the impact of Maoist conflict on religious experiences of people; secularization; and privatization and public presence of religion. Drawing from case studies included in the volume, the editors unequivocally state in the preface that even though Nepal has legally become a secular state, religious practices continue to thrive, secularization or the decline of religion and its removal from the public sphere has not occurred, and for many Nepalis religion still is a powerful way to address the suffering in the world (p. xii). This rather obvious conclusion, no doubt, applies to many old and new secular states, and to expect a decline of religion in public or private lives after a state becomes secular, therefore, is unwarranted in the first place. The chapters in this volume ethnographically situate, complicate, elaborate, and analyze these themes of thriving religious practices, lack of secularization, and a powerful presence of religion as a way to deal with the worldly suffering in contemporary Nepal. The chapters are organized into two broad sections.

Gellner and Letizia's introduction begins with a general overview of the politics of identity and religion after the fall of the Panchayat regime and contested meanings of secularism in the Nepali public sphere. The authors present the Indra Jatra debacle of 2008 featuring the Maoist coalition and its Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai, and the Newar protestors as one of the first incidents that exposed the controversial character of secularism in Nepal. The protests in Kathmandu started when Guthi Sansthan failed to provide three buffaloes in payment to groups of ritual dancers. Earlier, in the annual budget speech, the Maoist government had decided to cut state spending on festivals and ritual sacrifices like Indra Jatra. Unable to cope with increasing public pressure in the capital, the government eventually gave in to the protestors' demands for state funding.

Gellner and Letizia make a necessary distinction between secularization and secularism where the former denotes a social process marked by the declining significance of religion in social and political life. Secularism, on the other hand, broadly refers to "a political doctrine that implies the religious neutrality of the state, its protection of religious freedom of its citizens, and the equality of religions in the public sphere" (p. 13). While situating case studies contained in the volume, they also briefly note the rise of individualism and middle class values, the creation of new identities in the post-1990 public sphere, and the transformations and reforms of ritual traditions. However, other

than an almost obligatory mention of Mark Liechty's *Suitably Modern* (2003), the authors do not explicate what they mean by middle class values in Nepal.

Part I starts off with Letizia's thoughtful essay on different ideas of secularism championed by various pro- and anti-secular forces in contemporary Nepal. Although the essay is not very different from Letizia's previously published articles on different meanings and contours of secularism, she brings the debate up to date with the examination of the new constitution on emergent ideas of secularism (cf. Letizia 2011, 2013, 2016). Based on numerous interviews conducted over several years and a careful reading of landmark court cases related to cow slaughter, and Pashupati Area Development Trust, she concludes that secularism in Nepal is still in a transitory state that is "caught between aspirations and fears, the symbolic power of laws, token enforcement, and pragmatic accommodations for the sake of social harmony" (p. 67). Not without a tinge of irony, she also notes that *dharma-nirapekṣa* has reduced the vast and complex idea of *dharma* to the narrow and western sense of religion as one among many paths an individual can choose (p. 71).

Beautifully captured by the doleful title "When Gods Return to Their Homeland in the Himalayas," Ina Zharkevich's ethnography unpacks the legacy and impact of the Maoist conflict on the religious beliefs and experiences of the people of Thabang, once the heartland of the Maoist revolutionaries in mid-west Nepal. The title is a quote from one of her Kham Magar interlocutors, and it intimates the flight of the gods from the polluted and violent world of men. According to Zharkevich, the consequences of the violent conflict and Maoism in Thabang can be seen in de-sacralization of once-sacred sites and polity, transgression of the boundaries between purity and pollution, the increasing privatization of previously communitarian practices, subtle alteration of routinized ritual practices and mundane events, and the creation of a vacuum in the absence of a transcendent authority that then gets filled by competing ideologies of salvation like Maoism and Christianity (pp. 79–80). For Zharkevich, religious changes go together with other transformations in social spaces, which in Nepal are marked by changes in inter-caste relationships, assertions of identity and dignity, and adoption of new faiths that give rise of new authorities. Secularism then becomes more about power and recognition of different religious, caste, and ethnic groupings than just religion (p. 111).

Gérard Toffin analyzes New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Nepal focusing on what makes them distinct from and similar to other existing religions and Hinduism in particular. He argues that religious changes

associated with NRMs such as the cults of the gurus, relative egalitarianism and openness, yoga and meditation centers, concerns with health and happiness, rising interests in new food habits, Ayurveda, miracles, and healing are linked to “the new liberal and democratic ethos that has been reigning in the country since the 1990s and the concomitant rise of individualism in an increasingly modern, globalized society” (p. 116). Unfortunately, he does not provide direct evidence showing how individualism has risen, and one is not convinced by the link he implies between the aforementioned religious changes and individualism. For what they are, these religious changes are also the products of the rise of new social reference groups that depart from traditional religious, caste, and ethnic lines than individualism as such.¹ Interestingly, Toffin himself admits that despite the individualistic streak and an apparent break with the past, NRMs have not broken completely with the older traditions. In fact, even for the votaries of NRMs, old religion is important at family and neighborhood levels. Toffin, however, underestimates and insufficiently researches political clout and connections of some NRMs and their leaders, although it is true that the connections between Hindutva and NRMs organizations in Nepal are not as evident as in India.

Akin to NRMs, the proliferating cults of living goddesses or the possession of women by the goddess Bhagvati in mountain villages of eastern Nepal is the topic of Pustak Ghimire’s article in Chapter Five. For Ghimire, these cults are indicative of the vitality of popular Hinduism despite the end of the Hindu state. Notably, the centers of these cults are non-Brahmans. Ghimire also links the rise of these cults to the social crisis of modernity as represented by political violence and sufferings unleashed by the Maoist conflict. The author does not elaborate on why violence and sufferings of the Maoist conflict represent a social crisis of modernity rather than just the social crisis of recent Nepali history and politics. The cults of living goddesses are also at the center of competition for status and recognition between shamans and Bhagvati, and between indigenous women and the traditional power structure of caste and patriarchy. Therefore, for Ghimire, these goddesses are agents of ongoing political change as well even though their influence on the political choices of their devotees is not readily evident.

The next two chapters are concerned with the debate at the national and local levels over blood sacrifice. The debate over blood sacrifice has a long

¹ I thank Mark Liechty for this insight.

history in Hinduism and pre-dates the secularism debate but in recent years these debates have gathered more steam even though it might not have direct connections with the Nepali state declaring itself secular. Axel Michaels concentrates on the materiality and visibility of blood in the public sphere in Nepal and the surrounding controversies, imaginaries, and discourses. He examines rituals of blood sacrifice, the Gadhimai festival, and Durgapuja for example, and responses these practices generate in “a trans-cultural and media-saturated world” (p. 192). He argues that criticisms of sacrifice focus more on the materiality and visibility of blood on the streets rather than question animal sacrifice itself and its religious implications. The debates over sacrifice also focus more on civility, hygiene, public cruelty, and less on ethics and religious meanings. On the other hand, those who defend the sacrifice frame their arguments in a way that posits sacrifice as a form of resistance against the west’s civilizing mission and intolerant modernity. Michaels soberly considers both sides of the debate and concludes that blood sacrifice is becoming less and less visible in the public sphere.

Krishna Adhikari and David Gellner’s article focuses on the same issue but in a more localized context of Bahun-Chhetri clan rituals in western and central hills. They describe one of the clan’s decision to phase out animal sacrifice which was then reversed and show how these debates relate to ways of being modern and an appropriate Hindu in the contemporary world. According to the authors, the debate over animal sacrifice is indicative of a larger debate among the Nepali Hindus over which part of the tradition to retain and which to discard. They assert that such debate cannot be just explained by resorting to tiresome sociological explanations centered on easy dichotomies of old and the young, rural and urban, educated and uneducated, and women and men. The authors’ focus on internal tensions emanating from regional, caste, and sometimes linguistic differences within the Bahun-Chhetri culture is a useful corrective to hackneyed representations of the Bahun-Chhetri community as “a homogenous and hegemonic monolith from one end of the country to the other” (p. 258).

The second part of the book includes five articles. These articles deal with the place of religious traditions and public rituals in the making and remaking of ethnic identities in relation to the modernizing Nepali state and society. Three of the five articles focus on Tamangs alone. David Holmberg analyzes the Tamang festival of Lhochhar/Lhosar and argues that in contemporary Nepal Lhochhar is a productive site of forming identity and making political

demands on the Nepali state for recognition. Lhochhar emerged in the context of not just growing multiculturalism and de-Hinduizing Nepal but also widespread regional and international migration, and radical social and political changes after 1990. He contrasts the spectacle of Lhochhar with the other Tamang ritual of Chhechu, which is more intimate and less staged. Holmberg discussed Chhechu at a greater length in an article published in *American Ethnologist* highlighting its importance as a ritual of social and symbolic production of Tamang power, and also as a critique of dominant classes through dance-skits and exorcisms (Holmberg 2000). He observed Chhechu rituals in Nuwakot's Mhanegang village in 1976, 1977, and 1994. The shift from Chhechu to Lhosar illustrates the transition from private or community specific rituals to a more publicly organized and enacted one, a point Holmberg has been making repeatedly in the last two decades.

Brigitte Steinmann focuses on the Buddhist Tamangs of the eastern districts and their confrontations with the Maoists in the broader context of struggles against the Hindu monarchy. Based on her study of Tamangs from the 1980s onwards, she states that Tamangs imagined a non-Hindu state well before the process of secularization got underway although it is not clear when she thinks secularization began. Interestingly, she also states that in the early days Tamang resisted the dominant status of Parbatiya Hindus in business and bureaucracy rather than the monarchy.

Analyzing Tamang revolutionary songs, Steinmann points out the intermixture of Buddhist themes such as compassion with Maoist motifs like martyrdom. Both ideologies advocate liberation in different ways and therein lies the source of conflict but not without a space for accommodation. Here, a small clarification is necessary on what Steinmann calls the Maoist motif of martyrdom in revolutionary songs. While Maoist revolutionary songs are part of a long tradition of revolutionary or progressive songs in Nepal, not all revolutionary songs were Maoist during the Panchayat years or even during years of Maoist conflict. The motif of martyrdom, therefore, has a genealogy in the cultural products of the Nepali leftist movement that precedes the Maoists (cf. de Sales 2003; Grandin 1994).

Ben Campbell's article on Tamang Christians reasons that for many young Tamangs Christianity represents a "suitably modern mark of difference" because of its decisiveness, emphasis on personal revelation and awakening, awareness of the wider world, and the inversion of the Kathmandu-centric value systems and development schemes that marginalized Tamang

livelihood and social status (p. 404). Furthermore, for Campbell, the compatibility between Tamang identity and Christianity is illustrated by careful insertions of Christian references in Tamang songs of Rasuwa which he presents through a close study of a video CD of Tamang-Christian songs. The author is overly sympathetic in his elucidation of what Christianity has to offer to the people of Tamang communities. According to Campbell, for Tamangs Christianity is a medium of cultural ambition and reinvention of indigenous culture. As an alternative route to modernity, it offers possibilities for reconfiguration of self and collective roles in turbulent times marked by displacements resulting from urbanization and globalization. The article, however, is silent regarding the debate within the Tamang community over Christianity, and the cultural discontinuity it represents. Clearly, Campbell spoke only with Tamangs who found Christianity attractive.

One of the vexed questions after the declaration of Nepal as a secular state was about state rituals that previously involved the participation of the king and whether the new head of the state should take part in such explicitly Hindu rituals. Astrid Zotter examines different state rituals and zooms in on one particular ritual, the Pachali Bhairav sword procession, demonstrating how adapting monarchical Hindu rituals to the changed context of the secular republic was significantly more challenging than proclamations of secularism and the republic. Her argument that the substitution of the king by the new head of the state was not a formulated policy but a continuation of an earlier practice where the ruler's righteous rule was annually re-asserted is plausible and well-argued. A major difference from the earlier period is that while the king could alter or introduce a new ritual as an actor, the head of the state of the republic is a mere witness. The fact that most of these state-rituals are Newar traditions makes the state involvement even more contentious as highlighted by debates among the Newars themselves (p. 294). Newar critics that Zotter cites in this article believe that some of these rituals can be rescued from the Parbatiya dominated state and recalibrated as "a kind of ethnic Newar property" (p. 294). Rituals, then, are central to not just the secularism debate in Nepal but also the construction of ethnic identities.

Martin Gaenzsle examines the redefinition of Kiranti religion in the wake of ethnic politics since the 1990s. Turning attention away from the widely studied political role of ethnic organizations, Gaenzsle focuses on the impact of Kiranti organizations on cultural and religious life. One of the major impacts was the scripturalization of *mundhum* that loosely denotes a

body of formerly oral knowledge related to origin stories, myths, and ritual practices concerning the Kirants and their ancestors. Transmission and translation of *mundhum* through the use of print and digital media, creation of cultural heroes based on Kiranti folk stories, making of an iconic ethnic dance Sakela, and religionization of Kiranti tradition with its own shrines are all located in the context of secularism but Gaenszle does not really establish their connections to secularism other than at a vague sociological level.

Rajeev Bhargava's "Afterword: Nepalese Secularism in Comparative Perspective" discusses different theories and models of secularism, their specific histories, and applicability to the South Asian and Nepali context. Bhargava, the former director of Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies is an eminent theorist of secularism. He is well known for concepts like contextual secularism, and principled distance of the state from religions. *Secularism and Its Critics* (1998), a book Bhargava edited and introduced with his theoretical analysis of secularism is still a starting point for many explorations of secularism in South Asia and beyond. At a more practical level, it is likely that asking Bhargava to write an afterword is an attempt to make *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal* attractive to Indian readers, and other students and scholars of secularism. In his piece, Bhargava argues that each society needs to build its own distinctive version of secularism grounded in its specific contexts but fueled by some general principles such as "opposition to religious hegemony, religious tyranny, and religious and religion-based exclusions" (p. 458). Similarly, he identifies some of the wider goals of secularism that include freedom of social and political order from institutional religious domination, right to quit a religion, inter-religious equality, equality between believers and non-believers, and solidarity.

Bhargava is careful not to come across as prescribing a certain model of secularism to Nepal. Although he believes that Nepal needs to be broadly secular and that Nepali secularism is evolving and slowly finding articulatory, he concludes that it is up to Nepali actors to work an institutional design suited to their own socio-cultural context. Bhargava's reading of the controversial constitution-established meaning of "secular" as "protection of religion and culture being practiced since ancient times and religious and cultural freedom" is very generous. He asserts that if Article 4 is read together with other articles in the constitution "it dispels the notion that this smuggles in at least a weak establishment of Brahmanical Hinduism. Rather, the use of the word 'ancient' points to pre-religion ways of practice and worship that

are less distinguishable from culture and shape all modern existing in Nepal today” (pp. 454–455).

Of course, not everyone will agree with Bhargava’s sympathetic interpretation of arguably the most controversial passage of the 2015 constitution. His point that the constitution does not establish a religion is also indubitable. Nevertheless, if he had paid closer attention to the political negotiations and maneuverings right before the promulgation of the constitution and the immediate context to the insertion of the explanation of “secular” which wasn’t there in the draft constitution, he could have perhaps seen appeasement of the majority and coalition partners rather than a well-articulated and principled stance on the “secular.” It is a bit odd that a champion of contextual secularism and principled distance failed to notice the immediate context in which the makers of the 2015 constitution gave “secular” an explanation apparently devoid of any principle.

The most important contribution of *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal* to Nepal studies is its ethnographic and case-study approach to secularism although, in some of the essays, secularism is merely a backdrop and not an issue that is analyzed. As pointed out earlier, three of the case studies focus on Tamangs alone whereas the impact of secularism on Dalits, caste discrimination, and inter-caste relationship does not find space in the book. In fact, case studies do not need to have caste or ethnic groups as their unit of analysis. Case studies of public institutions such as the army, bureaucracy, and schools and their ties to different religions and the secular state will shed valuable light on other ideas and practices of secularism in contemporary Nepal (Bhandari 2016; Letizia 2013, 2016). There are a few minor errors that can be corrected in the next edition: *goreko* and *gore* instead of *goruko* and *goru* (p. 106 and 108); *gotra* exogamy not endogamy (p. 249), and Romeo and Kilo Sierra were police operations not Royal Nepal Army operations (p. 390). However, these limitations do not take anything away from this remarkable and timely volume. It will be relevant to not just students of Nepal and South Asian studies but also readers with a general interest in social and religious transformations as well as vexed politics of ethnicity, religion, and secularism in contemporary Nepal and the world. Theorists of secularism will find in the book’s rich ethnographies an invitation to rethink secularism’s multiple manifestations in the contemporary world.

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