

David N. Gellner, ed. 2010. *Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

With the worldwide proliferation of NGO activity in the last two decades, most flamboyantly financed by those who are superior to others, there has been a commensurate expansion in the literature, on and definitions of, civil society. The traditionally specific connotation of civil society, whose use was almost exclusively confined to some very specific genres of political analysis, has given way to a mélange of analytically perplexing meanings. In its most extreme and conceptually meaningless guise, civil society can mean just about anything that is blessed by an NGO or a donor. Lately, the crisis of the post-war west, the decline of its formerly cherished symbols of superiority, the collective and conspicuous failures of its states, the corruption at the financial core of its system, the rampant nepotism and cronyism in its political institutions and the loss of clarity and confidence of its once triumphant world view have deprived the NGO world of some its financial power, evangelical muscle and moral glamor. Yet, for the present at least, the term civil society in its incoherent and analytically unintelligible contemporary form still enjoys wide currency.

Along with the expansion of NGOdom, the loose, informal, common-sense terms activist and activism, attained a new meaning and a new velocity of circulation. People engaged in a wide range of white collar activities and conversant, to one degree or another, with the scripted global language of advocacy for improving the cultural east and the economic south through ICTs, legal reforms, market mechanisms, capacity building and what have you, also became activists, specifically civil society activists. Many of the most prominent civil society activists attend conferences, share experiences, set agendas, deliver services and generally tell people what to do, while maintaining all the while the pretence that they are non-political and ideologically neutral. This is a departure from the traditional activism that entailed mobilization and agitation, often with explicitly political intentions. The forms of propaganda also changed along with the character of the professional activist and the sponsors of activism.

*Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia*, the third volume in the series *Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action*, edited by David Gellner and published by Sage, reflects the eclectic meanings of the terms civil society and activist. Its ten essays straddle a range of meanings from activists in their traditional political role to institutions engaged in contemporary civic evangelism and including, curiously enough, commercial organizations. Anne de Sales and Sara Shneiderman, who have done extensive fieldwork in Nepal, on the Kham Magar and Thangmi communities respectively, recount the experiences of political individuals. Sale's essay traces the trajectory of Barman Budha Magar of Rolpa district, sometime sheep herder, communist member of the 1991 parliament and eventually a prominent Maoist activist, while Shneiderman describes the activities of two upper caste communist leaders among the Thangmi of a village in Sindhupalchowk. Siripala Hettige's essay on youth politics in Sri Lanka, co-relates historically the political orientation of Sinhala youth before and after the liberalization of the Sri Lankan economy.

While these three essays fall within the more orthodox definition of activism, Stefanie Strulik examines the complexities of women candidates for local body elections and their relationship with various nodes of established power at the local level, including family, political parties, bureaucrats and civil society organizations. As a more recent trend, mandatory women's participation in local elections lies methodologically at the intersection of many existing and new analytical categories. David Gellner and Mrigendra Karki's essay summarizes their ongoing survey of

400 activists from Kathmandu, 200 from Pokhara and 200 from Janakpur. Here, the book encounters, concretely for the first time, the problem of defining an activist. Inevitably, the question is raised. Regrettably, it is not answered. To complicate matters, though they define activism as being “dedicated to ends of a non-economic sort,” individuals from business and industry organizations qualify for inclusion as categories of activists, ostensibly because a Chamber of Commerce is, by some unexplained rationale equivalent to a Lions Club, and is defined by its social and charitable pursuits. What ensues from the lack of conceptual clarity are overlapping categories and the exclusion of people from institutions like the Bar Association, the Journalists Federation, the Social Welfare Council, or the Ministry of Health, who by this criterion, merit an equal claim for inclusion.

The second part of the book, titled *Development*, consists of four essays on diverse themes. *Development* is another term the profligacy of whose use is not matched by an equal rigor of its definition. David Lewis and Celayne Heaton Shrestha discuss the relationship between NGO’s donors and the government in Bangladesh and Nepal respectively. These relationships are very different in the two countries, pointing to entirely different notions of what NGO-civil society could mean in very different political contexts. Arjun Guneratne outlines the historical evolution of what is today termed environmental activism, from the narrow idea of game protection to wildlife conservation to the present idea of bio-diversity protection, analyzing the class basis of the organizations involved in these pursuits. The last essay by William Fisher grapples with the idea of civil society and its possible meanings, taking up some of the issues raised briefly in Gellner’s introduction.

While some of the essays in this volume make interesting ethnographic and historical contributions, what is most striking about the book is the failure to furnish a cogent relationship between its title and its essays. What place does which kind of civil society occupy in the political narratives of the first two essays? How is that civil society different from the one in Heaton Shrestha’s essay on activists and development, or from the one that is not discussed in Gellner and Karki? How is the notion of civil society to be sustained in the light of Lewis and Fisher’s catalogue of the differences between different kinds of NGO organizations? How are political activists to be differentiated from NGO activists within a single analytically meaningful notion of activists? What kinds of activities qualify individuals for recognition as activists if businessmen in chambers of commerce are also activists?

These are important questions to address. Most of the individual essays do not explore or even tangentially address the relationship between the terms that constitute the title of the volume. A conceptual essay laying out the analytical problems that lurk in this relationship, or, at a minimum, situating the essays within the title of the volume would have been useful. Unfortunately, the editor's introduction fails on both counts.

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