

Book Reviews

David N. Gellner, ed. 2009. *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage.

In the 1990s, social scientists almost unanimously accepted the usefulness of the concept of civil society. In fact, civil society appeared as the master concept that aimed to cure all the ills facing the world. In *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society*, David Gellner, Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University, argues that the concept of civil society, indeed, is useful for understanding a variety of activism in contemporary South Asia. The edited volume, which is divided into four sections and eleven empirical chapters, includes cases of activism from Nepal, India and Sri Lanka.

In his introduction, Gellner reviews the concept of civil society; I will return to this issue at the end of this essay. The first section of the book includes two ethnographic reports on Hindu activism in India. Minoru Mio focuses on Hindu youth activism in Udaipur in north-western India, where new modes of Hindu youth celebrations became popular in the 1990s. Mio argues that popular Bollywood culture, local valor stories, forms of Hindu masculinity, and the organizational influence of Hindu nationalist organizations collectively played role in the making of youth activism. The youth, in the process, created a public space for themselves, which would not have become possible in South Asian society that values age-based hierarchy. Peggi Froerer, on the other hand, investigates Hindu activism among the tribal populations in Chhattisgarh in central India. She argues that the presence of Hindu activists there not only helped deliver much needed health services but also contributed to those marginal communities' struggle for social justice. Hindu activism, which appears to be deeply "anti-civil," actually creates a public space for otherwise voiceless tribal populations. She thus problematizes the liberal underpinning of contemporary civil society discourse.

The second section examines activism in a transnational context. Eva Gerharz investigates interaction between the Tamil diaspora and the local Tamils in Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, an area that witnessed some semblance of peace in the aftermath of the declaration of ceasefire between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil insurgents in 2002. Gerharz argues that Tamil diaspora involved itself in the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and family networks, through which

they contributed to the reconstruction of their homeland and engaged in reimagining the Tamil nation. But the interaction between the diaspora and the local was classed, gendered, and sexualized. Sara Shneiderman explores Thangmi ethnic activism and identities in two national contexts – India and Nepal. Whereas the Thangmis, one of the most marginalized of Nepal’s numerous ethnic groups, prioritized their syncretic cultural practice over overt political discourse, their Indian brethren did quite the opposite, i.e., they prioritized political discourse over cultural practice. She explains this difference in terms of different national experience. Whereas the Indian Thamis’s cultural politics became meaningful in the context of reservation policy, their Nepali counterparts focused on their “authentic” cultural practices as the Nepali context did not offer a comparable “incentive” structure. Much like the Tamil diaspora experience, the Thami activists’ mutual interaction across the Indo-Nepal border was marked by tension and ambivalence.

The third section of the book includes two Dalit movements from south India and one from Nepal. Whereas Hugo Gorringer examines the Dalit Panther movement, David Mosse investigates Dalit struggle within the Catholic churches. Laurie Ann Vasily, on the other hand, examines Nepal’s recent Dalit activism. Together these studies highlight several important commonalities. First, Dalits in South Asia still face severe discrimination, inhuman treatment, and even mass killing despite their decades of struggle and the guaranteeing of formal equality. Second, as Mosse’s research shows, merely by switching one’s loyalty to putatively nondiscriminatory, non-Hindu belief systems does not automatically ensure equality and liberation. Third, these studies point out that the Dalits themselves are divided into different castes, socio-economic status, and regional groups; these divisions are equally pernicious for the development of a powerful Dalit movement. Fourth, these studies show that the Dalit movements have now become part of local and global activist networks, but Vasily’s study in Nepal indicates that national and international NGOs are both empowering and debilitating for the Dalit causes. Finally, Dalit activism in Nepal and India shows that political parties and electoral politics have contradictory implications for the Dalit quest for equality.

The final section of the book is devoted to Nepal’s ethnic movements. These cases highlight activists’ cultural work and their efforts to construct viable identities in the context of Nepal’s volatile politics and society. Giesele Krauskopff examines the biographies of two Nepali Tharu scholar-activists to investigate latter’s efforts at re-fashioning a Tharu

identity, particularly the activists' efforts to link the Tharu past to Gautama the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Mukta S. Tamang similarly examines Tamang activists' effort to reconstruct their identity out of the obscure (official) historical materials. He argues that the oral narratives that depict Tamang experience with the expansion of the Gorkhali state in the 18th and 19th century offer the raw material out of which Tamang activists construct their identity. In the process, territorial consciousness has become central to contemporary Tamang identity, according to Tamang. Finally, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine maps Nepal's history from the middle of the 18th century up to now. Based on her long association as an anthropologist with the Magars in Nepal's western hills, she narrates changing discourse and identity of the Magars. At the end of her long essay, she still puzzles about the nature of nation and nationalism in contemporary Nepal.

Readers interested in contemporary caste and ethnic politics in South Asia will find the book a useful collection. But what about the concept of civil society that Gellner passionately advocates in the introduction of the book? It is doubtful that the book adds anything worthwhile to what has been already said about civil society. Trying hard to encompass all empirical chapters in the book in his civil society framework, Gellner endorses a variant of liberal ("ideal-typical") notion of civil society, insisting that political parties should be included in the definition. Curiously, he does not dwell on why market should be excluded from the concept of civil society. After all market as civil society has a solid footing in Western political thought.

It is interesting that several authors in the book never use the concept of civil society. Hugo Gorringer draws on the social movement literature, which has a far-secured academic footing in the social sciences. Sara Shneiderman begins her report with this disclaimer: "Although the conference...was conceived in terms of the connection between 'activism' and 'civil society,' I have never really conceptualized my research under either of those rubrics" (p. 115). As such, the book's empirical chapters do not offer any compelling reason why social scientists should care about the concept of civil society. Most empirical chapters in the book indicate that "civil society" finds its place at the state-society interface and disjuncture. The question of civil society then is also the question of the South Asians' experience with the state. Unfortunately, the society-state interface remains under-theorized.

Chudamani Basnet
South Asian University