

Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway. 2016. *Signing and Belonging in Nepal*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.

In an accessible ethnographic account of deafness in Nepal, Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway studies various social, cultural and historical factors that underpinned the making and shaping of Deaf community in Nepal and Nepali Sign Language (NSL). The book is a welcome introduction to Deaf social life in Nepal during the momentous years from 1996–2006. In her book the author, following a common convention in Deaf Studies, uses the English word “deaf” in lowercase to indicate the inability to hear, “Deaf” with capital D to indicate “identification as a member of a signing community” and “d/Deaf” to “refer to groups or situations in which both biological and cultural framings of d/Deafness are relevant” (p. 5). For Hoffmann-Dilloway, changing notions of d/Deafness, Deaf sociality, and the emergence of NSL can best be understood against the backdrop of Nepal’s long history as a Hindu kingdom and its transition to a secular republic.

In the first chapter, the author notes that karmic and ethnolinguistic models were two dominant existing models of understanding d/Deafness in Nepal. Karmic framing stigmatized deafness and related deafness with the notions of purity and pollution. On the other hand, the ethnolinguistic model is the idea that “Deaf signers constituted a distinct, but marginalized,

ethnolinguistic group, identified and constituted by the use of a particular language, Nepali Sign Language” (p. 3). Even though these two models appear opposed to each other, the author makes a case that it is necessary to pay attention not only to the contrast between the models but also to their convergence. The author suggests that such convergence is evident in the emergence and standardization of NSL and its ties to Hindu symbolisms, ethos of purity and good karma, and Nepali nationalism. According to her, these ties exist because caste Hinduism and spoken Nepali language served as repertoires from which NSL signs and their interpretations were drawn. Therefore “rather than outright rejecting local understandings of personhood and social groups based in notions of karma and transmissible purity and pollution, Deaf signers employed them in producing Deafness as an ethnolinguistic category in Nepal” (p. 7).

The second chapter discusses the theoretical, historical and cultural contexts that shaped attitudes towards deafness and led to the emergence of Deaf sociality in Nepal. Hoffmann-Dilloway draws a parallel between the formation of various ethnic or *jāt* categories and the formation of a Deaf *jāt*. The state and Hinduism played instrumental roles in both of these formations and, as in other processes of ethnicity formation, the shared language (NSL in this case) was advanced as a primary justification for an ethnic understanding of Deafness. Deaf thus became an ethnolinguistic identity for many and NSL a mother “tongue,” so to speak.

This formulation of and identification with Deaf ethnicity was “complicated by other ethnically based networks of belonging, such as *Ādivāsī Janajāti* identities” (p. 39). The unpacking of this complication is the central focus of the third chapter, where the author argues that various linguistic forms and their meanings are mediated by interpretations that are socially situated. Moreover, the meanings of signs are the product of interactions informed by social and cultural context. She also notes that when the Nepali Deaf community adopted an ethnolinguistic model of Deafness, the sociopolitical context in which various ethnic and linguistic identities were being constructed, was dominated by a linguistic monolith perspective of language. This perspective saw diversity as danger and sought to standardize NSL. According to the author, the standardization project attempted “to reduce variation not only in the ways people signed but also in the social information people derived from these forms” (p. 55). Furthermore, Hoffmann-Dilloway argues that the project aimed to link NSL and Deaf

ethnolinguistic identity with dominant symbols of the Hindu kingdom. She gives the example of signs for names of days to prove her point. However, it should be pointed out that the days of the week in Nepali are not named after Hindu deities, as she claims, but after planets and other celestial bodies.

Chapter four explores the relationship between homesign systems and NSL. Owing to the recent emergence of NSL, most of its users were relatively young, while old people used homesign systems. This also raised a more theoretical question because as older people were not NSL signers, within the ethnolinguistic framework they could not be considered Deaf. Here the author comments that social support is as important as individual competency in inclusion/exclusion of a person from the Deaf category, and she uses two contrasting case studies to demonstrate her thesis.

The final ethnographic chapter presents an analysis of the relationship between hearing Nepalis and Deaf signers. It is embarrassing that this chapter, set in the Bakery Café, mistakenly states that its owner, Shyam Kakshapati, a Newar businessman originally from Tansen, was “a member of the Rana family” (p. 96). The author also makes a few ungrounded assumptions based on this misidentification of the owner with the Ranas. Despite this slip, the chapter is quite successful in showing how the ideologies of *vikās*, class, and modernity coexisted and competed with the karma framework in shaping hearing Nepalis’ understanding of deafness. These arguments aren’t very original and have been explained better by anthropologists Stacy Pigg (1992, 1996), and Mark Liechty (2008[2003]) but the author uses them adroitly in the context of several competing understandings of Deafness. I found the author’s claim that the ordinarily aid-receiving hearing Nepalis play the role of aid-giving modern/“*bikāsi*” persona in their interaction at the Café with Deaf signers (aid-receivers) a little stretched and lacking in evidence. In addition, the author repeats the mistake made by Pigg and seems oblivious that Nepalis pronounce the word as *bikāse* not *bikāsi*.

The concluding chapter discusses what lies ahead for the Deaf community in a new Nepal, where discussions of geography and ethnicity based diversity are relevant for Deaf and hearing Nepalis alike. This book will be of great interest to scholars and students of Deaf studies as a case study of Deaf identity formation in Nepal. It is also a useful resource for hearing Nepalis, such as myself, who know little of the lives of Deaf Nepalis but are eager to learn more.

## References

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