Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia (Governance, conflict, and civic action: volume 2)

edited by David N. Gellner
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Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil society in South Asia (Governance, conflict, and civic action: volume 3)

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These two books are the products of the same conference that was held in Oxford in 2005 as part of a larger collaborative project drawing together academic institutes in Bielefeld (Germany), Kathmandu (Nepal), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Oxford (UK), but also including participants from outside these institutions and countries. And besides the two books under review here, it is planned that this project will result in some four other volumes in the series *Governance, Conflict and Civic Action*.

The key terms in the titles of the two volumes taken together with the words in the name of the series clearly indicate the intended readership. If the terms conflict, governance, activism, civil society, ethnicity, or South Asia appeal, you are likely to find the books useful. Hence, these volumes will be of interest to scholars of the Himalayan area (many of the chapters are on Nepal) as well as to South Asianists more generally.

But these books also deserve a more general readership as they are, in many ways, an example of contemporary social science at its best. Motivated by the importance of the issues under consideration (rather than by, say, the desire to hoist theoretical flags or methodological banners), the volumes offer the reader in-depth ethnographic understandings of the areas and the communities that they have researched. And the contributing authors ground these understandings in their own—often extensive—fieldwork, as well as in comprehensive reading. There are some important qualifications to the last statement to which I will return at the end of this review.

The books cover a wide range of topics and areas. In the second volume, two chapters address Hindu nationalism as ethnic activism: as it filters into

youth-led organisations for new religious performances in Rajasthan, India, on the one hand (Minoru Mio); and as violence-espousing uncivil society that, nevertheless, is engaged in social work in Central India on the other (Peggy Froerer). Two chapters consider translocal and transnational topics: diasporic returnees as development experts and cultural brokers in Jaffna, Sri Lanka (Eva Gerharz); and the processes by which varied and inconsistent ethnic practices in Nepal are distilled into 'authentic' ethnic culture and politically motivated discourse in India (Sara Shneiderman). Dalit activism is the subject of three chapters: how it in fact reinforces caste-based structures in Tamil Nadu, India (Hugo Gorringe); how it counters caste-divisions maintained in the ostensibly non-caste and universal Catholic Church, also in Tamil Nadu (David Mosse); and how it relates to the state, to political parties, to underground Maoists and to NGOs in Nepal (Laurie Ann Vasily). The final three contributions to the second volume scrutinize ethnic or *janajati* 'indigenous nationality' activism in Nepal: how activists devise ethnic identities that are new but yet appear old, by combining Buddhist universalism with particularist emphases on origin, birth and heritage (Gisèle Krauskopff); how activists (local intellectuals, writers of history and so on) establish a particular territory as the ancient and original homeland for an ethnic group (Mukta S. Tamang); and how, today, the Brahmanic purism associated with Sanskritization and identities based on caste are being replaced by a purism on ethnic (*janajati*) grounds and identities based on geography (Marie Lecomte-Tilouine).

In Volume 3, the two opening chapters portray activists from the political left in Nepal: how universalist communist ideology and particularist ethnic identity are combined in the life of one political veteran (Anne de Sales); and how the rural success of the Nepali Maoists had in fact been prepared for by an earlier generation of leftist activists (Sara Shneiderman, again). Other contributions consider the role of marginal and disadvantaged but educated youth in politics and conflict in Sri Lanka (Siripala Hettige); and how women in rural, local government in India have to stand up to locally entrenched male bureaucrats, restrictive gender norms such as *purdah*, and male political patrons, but also to urban women activists who try to bypass them (Stefanie Strulik). A chapter on why and how activists in Nepal should be investigated offers insights into research as practical work as well as into the motivations of activists, where 'opposition to social evils' is prominent (David N. Gellner and Mrigendra Bahadur Karki). The final

three empirical contributions in Volume 3 consider the donor-connected issues of civil society and 'good governance' as they were played out in state-NGO relations in Bangladesh (David Lewis); the NGO sector in Nepal and its connections as well as boundaries with the State (Celayne Heaton Shrestha); and colonial expatriates, indigenous elites, and the present-day urban middle class as bearers of environmental activism in Sri Lanka (Arjun Guneratne).Throughout, the contributions highlight and portray individual activists—sometimes sketchily, sometimes in great detail. For reasons of space, I cannot go further into the individual chapters, but one more general comment might be appropriate; it is striking how prominent two kinds of cultural work are in the very varied, social and political activism described in these volumes. First, we have culture as content: 'awareness' (of social ills, of ethnic heritage, and so on) is a recurrent theme in both books, as is how activists manipulate this by means of 'awareness-raising' activities, teaching, research, the writing of history and the like. Seen in this light, the public sphere of civil society appears to be something formed by magazines, seminars and conferences, but also by awareness-raising songs. And second, there is culture as form: songs (again), food, costume, ritual, cultural programs, performances, festivals and so on consistently appear in the activists' arsenal as ethnic 'stuff' to be drawn upon, as a 'cover' for political activities, and as a public sphere—an arena for civil society—in its own right.

Introductory chapters to both volumes by the editor (David N. Gellner) and a final chapter in the third volume (by William F. Fisher) provide a theoretical frame and anchor to the empirical contributions. These bookends are devoted to more general discussions of the central notions, with civil society as a principal concept. In a brief but illuminating exposition of the heavily used but tricky notion of civil society, the introduction to Volume 2 arrives at a working definition. To comment briefly on this, the paradigmatic cases of civil society are seen to be those forms of voluntary, associational life that 'are engaged in the pursuit of a moral or public good' (Froerer, Volume 2, p. 74) or campaigns 'to re-make the world' (Gellner, Volume 2, p. 1), that is, overt, political and social activism. I would argue that another 'paradigm case' of civil society is what we find in Finnegan (1989): amateur classical orchestras, rock and jazz groups, choirs, brass bands, pubs and clubs as venues for musical performance, and the like. As we have seen above, 'activism' for such cultural ends can also be very

socially and politically important—as the editor repeatedly emphasizes, 'politics is everywhere' (Gellner, Volume 3, p. 6; cf. Gellner Volume 2, p. 7).

While the contributions to these volumes are well grounded, not only in field research but also in the relevant literature, there are nevertheless some striking gaps. First, many chapters—particularly those on Dalit movements—would have benefited from taking into account Weisethaunet's (1998) important contribution to the study of Dalit consciousness and strategies. Second, Krämer's (1996) work on national integration and ethnic mobilization in Nepal remains strangely uncited by any contributor to these two volumes. While the first omission may have something to do with the social/political rather than cultural point of entry, the latter is in line with a general rule that applies to all but two contributions in these two books. According to this rule, authors only cite works in their own language, or in their own language plus English. Of course, this is not unique to these volumes but a much wider pattern in social science. But when it comes to scholarship of the Himalayan area, there is an important qualification to this rule: many of the contributors to these volumes do cite works in local languages (principally Nepali).

To conclude, these two volumes have convinced me, despite my being a little hesitant at the outset, that there is research value in the concept of civil society, and that as a 'guiding metaphor' for research (Gellner, Volume 2, p. 10), civil society is quite fruitful. And if we can live with the ambiguous, complex and contested concept of 'culture'—an idea that has proved essential to research in the social sciences and the humanities—we can certainly live with 'civil society'.

References

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