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Review of "Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?" by Mona Bhan

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Carole McGranahan on *Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?*

Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?

Mona Bhan. Contemporary South Asia Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. 231 pages. ISBN 0415819806.

Reviewed by Carole McGranahan

The war “brought the border closer.” This poignant claim is at the heart of anthropologist Mona Bhan’s fine book *Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?* It is a sentiment expressed repeatedly to her by members of the Brogora community with whom she did research from 1999-2012 in the aftermath of the Kargil War. In this book, Bhan explores what Brogora mean about the border coming closer through a fascinating discussion of the historical politics of cultural identity, issues of nation and state, and questions of religion and loyalty in the Kargil area of Ladakh in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (commonly referred to as “Kashmir”). If Kashmir is unique within India for its Muslim population, then Kargil and Ladakh are unique within Kashmir for their substantial Buddhist populations alongside majority Shi’a Muslim and minority Sunni Muslim groups. The four villages in which Bhan worked comprise the near entirety of the 3,000-strong Brogora population in India, which, while Buddhist, has long been considered “different” in

terms of both race and culture from the more “Tibetan” Buddhists of other regions of Ladakh (as discussed in detail in Chapter 2). As an “Aryan” Buddhist group, the Brogora (sometimes mistakenly referred to as “Dards”) have long been marginalized in broader politics at both regional and national levels; Bhan’s book shows how this marginalization was challenged by Brogora as well as by representatives of the state via post-war Indian military efforts to forge new economic, social, and political possibilities for Brogora. This “hearts and minds” project was full of complications and contradictions, revealing the limits of both state projects of armed social welfare and community projects of upward national mobility.

In her own words, Bhan describes the book as an exploration of “how the tropes of healing and heart warfare became tools to normalize state-centric visions of territory, sovereignty, and democracy in post-war Kargil” (p. 7). Indeed, these are the areas in which the book shines. Bhan does excellent ethnographic and analytic work discussing the Hill Council and Operation Sadhbhavna (Operation “Goodwill”) in terms of new possibilities and demands for Brogora political participation. Participation here is national, appearing as a way of advancing the Brogora community, if not certain individuals, in terms of both democratic governance and military labor. Neither, however, quite work

out as planned. Brogora military participation remains mostly at the level of physical portering labor rather than official acceptance into and enrollment in the military. Democratic participation is equally uneven, as perhaps best evidenced by a story Bhan tells in Chapter 5. Local officials of the Kargil Hill Council were regularly mistreated by the Army, or at a minimum perceived they were being mistreated. One Councillor, traveling on official business in a jeep flying the Indian flag, was detained for hours by soldiers and claimed “severe harassment” (p. 183). His letter to military officials demanding an explanation went unanswered. Such stories illustrate one of Bhan’s overall arguments about the limits of political belonging in modern India for marginal communities such as the Brogora, and more broadly, of territories such as Kashmir that do not fit mainstream Indian narratives of who constitutes the nation and its desired futures.

In reviewing this book for *HIMALAYA*, one question that comes to mind is where does it fit within Himalayan Studies? I find this book beautifully situated within a political anthropology of Ladakh and of Kashmir, and in solid dialogue with relevant anthropological literatures on identity, humanitarianism, and democracy. Brogora histories are crucial for understanding Buddhist Kashmir beyond just “Tibetan” Buddhism, and yet, what sort of



dialogue should Brogpa Studies have with Tibetan Studies? What connections might be of use in putting this particular history in dialogue with the broader field of Tibetan Studies, rather than just scholarship from Ladakh? I think there is something to gain from this, whether it is in terms of thinking about polyandry or citizenship or the village-scaled variants of Buddhism found throughout the Himalaya. Beyond Tibetan Studies, however, is the question of Nepal. Nepalis appear at times in this book as the bad guys, as non-citizen usurpers of Brogpa opportunities. Most likely escaping the horrific civil war that raged in Nepal from roughly 1996 through 2006, the presence of Nepalis in Kargil begs for more commentary. Why were they there? Who were they? What was it about the Nepalis that troubled the Brogpa—just the fact that they were presumed not to be citizens of India or others things as well? Could it have anything to do with the Gorkha troops in the Indian Army and the potential irony of their involvement in Operation Sadhbhavna?

The 4/8 Gorkha Rifles, or in full: the Fourth Battalion of the Eighth Gorkha Rifles (not “the 48 Gurkha Rifles,” p. 121), were part of Operation Sadhbhavna, just as other Gorkha troops had fought in the Kargil War, notably the decorated 1/11 Gorkha Rifles. Gorkha troops in the Indian Army are Nepali troops, recruited from both inside Nepal

as well as from the many Nepali-speaking communities throughout the Indian Himalaya. In the book, the only soldiers we meet are high-ranking officers with names such as Sharma, Pandey, and Srivastava. Each of these officers is presented as Indian, and Operation Sadhbhavna as designed to compassionately and appropriately incorporate Brogpas into India by fostering skills such as literacy and economic self-sufficiency along with national loyalty (and thus thwarting possible subversion or counterinsurgency). But, if the officers were Indian, who were the soldiers? More specifically: how many of the soldiers involved in Operation Sadhbhavna were Nepali? If Nepali men were serving in another country’s army and tasked with creating good Indian citizens, this realization adds another layer of complications to the story of political possibility in not only Kargil, but also across the Himalaya. It is these sorts of bigger connections that can make detailed local studies even more powerful. *Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity: From Warfare to Welfare?* is a local study which raises important national questions. In the hands of HIMALAYA readers, the possibility exists to think beyond the nation to the region, and to ask what national borders and scholarship closes us off from seeing. What critical thinking about the Himalayan region can and should we be doing? Be it in terms of marginality, citizenship, war, or Buddhism, there are important connections scholars

of the Himalaya should be making but sometimes miss. As borders become closer, ethnographic research is ever more invaluable in presenting what that means for people in their everyday lives, and for the inclusions and exclusions involved in that process on behalf of both Brogpa villagers and Indian Army officers.

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