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## Book review of 'Living Martyrs' by James Fisher

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BOOK REVIEWS

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*Living Martyrs*

By James Fisher. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. 336 pages.

Fisher's book is an attempt to capture the lives and stories of perhaps one of the most important and also most underplayed characters in the history of modern Nepal—Tanka Prasad Acharya and his wife Rewanta Kumari Acharya. Tanka Prasad was one of the first revolutionaries involved in the rebellion against and eventually the overthrow of the autocratic Rana regime, which had ruled Nepal for a period of about a hundred years. But to tell their stories is not the only aim Fisher has in mind in writing the book.

The book is primarily an ethnographical venture through the 'unconventional prism' of person-centered narratives. The scandalous trade of ethnology is notorious for the inevitable projection of the ethnographer's own prejudices, in its Gadamerian sense, on to the image of the *ethnos* s/he presents, and hence the accusations of misrepresentation. Fisher wishes to limit this by imparting agency to the other—by letting it speak for itself.

The book flows with Tanka Prasad and Rewanta Kumari alternately retelling the moments in their lives, and thus also highlighting the distinction in their domains of action or their *Karma Kshetra*, the gendered nature of Hindu Nepalese society provides each with. Fisher is very careful to point against a feminist reading of the oppressed woman in a patriarchal society. As an anthropologist with a post-modernist orientation, he is wary of homogenizing meta-narratives, which tend to engulf the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the life-worlds inhabited by individuals in our multicultural universe.

Tanka Prasad remains what in theories of revolutions is called a marginal elite, a middle class elite with a background of education in western thoughts but marginalized from the main political discourse in the country. Fisher's book goes further in deconstructing the life lived by this 'typical' third world revolutionary by showing the interplay and fusion of modern western political ideas and traditional Hindu notions of morality to create a unique political sensibility which defied the contemporary repressive power structures in his society, and moreover which denies a static and essentialized view of culture and tradition.

Much of the book consists of and relies on the recounting of the lives of the two by themselves. But memory remains as open to interpretation as a text by one's favorite author. As one tries to remember one's own life, one cannot but highlight and reinterpret one's own memories. Fisher's remedy to this is to supplant their narrations with other sources relevant and related to their lives. Fisher's book is in some sense a clarification, by examples, of the hermeneutic situation of the self and the interpretive nature of understanding through which one sees and recreates the world it inhabits.

Fisher's appellation of the 'supra-subaltern' to Tanka Prasad, though might sound a little clumsy or even oxymoronic, I think aptly describes the position of Tanka Prasad in the terrain of the historical landscape of Nepali politics. The subaltern is the voice muted by or under the grand discourses of history, be that of colonialism, nationalism or modernity. The life stories retold in the book in some sense amplify those 'small voices of history,' to use Ranajit Guha's words, and put them before and over the nationalist and other historiographies that homogenize the singularity or peculiarity of experience, uplifting them from their subalternity.

The book remains loyal to its limitations as following the lives of a traditional Brahman couple, and anyone trying to form a general picture of Nepali history and society by reading it will be misled and disappointed. An excellent example of Geertzian 'cases and interpretations.' A must read for anyone with any interest in Nepali society and politics.

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