

8-1-2012

**Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours, David Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu, Eds., and Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia, David Gellner, Ed.; Reviewed by Mallika Shakya**

Mallika Shakya  
*University of Pretoria*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

**Recommended Citation**

Shakya, Mallika. 2012. Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours, David Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu, Eds., and Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia, David Gellner, Ed.; Reviewed by Mallika Shakya. *HIMALAYA* 31(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol31/iss1/18>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

## LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA: MICROPROCESSES OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN NEPAL AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

BY DAVID GELLNER AND KRISHNA  
HACHHETHU, EDs.

New Delhi: Sage, 2008. 468 p. ISBN: 9780761936503.  
(Volume 1 of the series *Governance, Conflict and Civic  
Action*)

## ETHNIC ACTIVISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTH ASIA

BY DAVID GELLNER, ED.

New Delhi: Sage, 2009. 372 p. ISBN: 9788132100867  
(Volume 2 of the series *Governance, Conflict and Civic  
Action*)

REVIEWED BY MALLIKA SHAKYA

The two books I am reviewing here draw on the research conducted under “The (Micro) Politics of Democratisation or MIDEA” project, funded by the European Commission and run by the University of Bielefeld, which deserves credit on three counts. First, it offers an ethnographic perspective of “how things do actually work (or fail to work, as the case may be)” that should complement the normative literature already out there on democratization. The twenty-eight chapters in the two volumes scrutinise what they call current and past institutions of governance, ranging from religion and caste to ethnicity and other socio-cultural practices. In so doing, its central focus is on people – elite, mass and downtrodden – who insert themselves everywhere, every time to constitute an “everyday state.” This state is not free from the national state of party politics, governmental mechanisms, and policy premises,

yet it necessarily is a site for constant contestation and negotiation. Second, while invoking the “micro” for the sake of understanding macro governance, this project forges a constructive and effective collaboration of anthropologists and sociologists with political scientists, as well as with the specialists of conflict, transition, and development. Third, in exploring this world of “in between,” the two volumes decisively propose a disciplinary shift within anthropology – from the old notions of ritual (im)purity and symbolism to the new engagement with deliberative politics. I will briefly summarise the key chapters from both volumes in substantiating these three points.

The two volumes separate themselves on the institutionality of governance. Volume One is about the formal institutions created and contested for bringing national governance to everyday sites and scenes. Volume Two is about the process through which the formal enters the informal world that is neither the state apparatus nor commercial business, nor the private spheres of family and kinship.

### **Vol I: Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours**

Democracy cannot be mandated from above. But what forms do everyday contestations of democratization and development take, especially involving various population groups of caste, ethnicity, and class situated differently within the national power equation? This is the central question in Volume One. Following a rich introduction, Dhruva Kumar asks in Chapter 2 whether local leadership will ever rid itself from the patronages of ethnic, class, and party elitism. Although structural decentralization has been the slogan of the state throughout both Panchayat and democratic regimes, as evident in a series of decentralization policies and programmes implemented in the past half-century in Nepal, the centre has remained suspicious and manipulative of the way local bodies function. This manifests in two chapters on local politics. Krishna Hachhethu (Chapter 3) presents a rich case study of the central-southern Dhanusha district of Nepal that addresses the yawning gap between the 1990s rhetoric “of people, by people, for people” and its practice in ways of finding actual provisions for contesting central elitism. Uma Nath Baral (Chapter 9) discusses, in the context of the Dhikur-Pokhari village in Pokhara, how the roots of today’s social exclusion go as far back as the nineteenth century, when the Bahuns took over village leadership from the Gurungs.

Ethnicity and regionalism emerge as the defining features of local politics. Chapters 5 and 6 look into longitudinal changes in ethnic and regional movements, as they shift from struggles over symbols to the practice of deliberative politics. For example, David Gellner and

Mrigendra Karki (Chapter 5) show how the Panchayat-era Newar activism (such as Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala or “lineage of language”) seemed unsuitable for dealing with the new multi-party politics of the 1990s. This led to a new confederal body being founded (i.e. Newa De Dabu or Newa National Forum), which made itself a direct counterpart of the broader national movement of all janajatis. In the succeeding Chapter 6, Dilli Ram Dahal portrays a similar flux in the Tarai, while making a point that the Tarai is more complex in terms of the border politics and the entrenched history of state-led ethnic migration.

Discussions of deliberative local politics should not overlook the politics of development. Drawing on her research in remote Bajhang district in the early 1990s, Pfaff-Czarnecka (Chapter 4) examines the changes (and lack thereof) in local coalitions among the civil servants, politicians, and entrepreneurs involving distribution of food and land. Complementing this is a biographical essay by Keshab Man Shakya (Chapter 10), which offers deep insights into how the Local Self-Governance Act (LSG) of 1999 brought about a paradigm shift in the way local service delivery was administered in Nepal. Earlier, even though donors did experiment with multiple modalities, service delivery was essentially seen as the responsibility of the government during the Panchayat regime. The LSG, on the other hand, created the legal base for delegating planning authority to local autonomous bodies such as NGOs. Unintentionally as it may have been, democratic governance came to be associated with “dollar kheti” (dollar cultivation), where NGOs mushroomed beyond where they could be reasonably regulated.

On-going political transition features more heavily in some chapters than others. For example, in Chapter 7, Bishnu Upreti discusses the nature and types of local disputes arising from the Maoist conflict and ways of settling them, as the political transition approaches a denouement. Kiyoko Ogura’s Chapter 8 on the Maoists’ district governments also focuses on the political transition, and it should be singled out for its rich ethnography and insightful analytics. Both the main text and appendices of her chapter document how Maoist village structures emerged, and became consolidated amid local contestations in the remote western hills. Beyond strict politics, these structures do deal with issues ranging from distribution and justice to family and social organisation, making Ogura’s chapter a valuable resource not only for researchers of the Maoist movement, but for those interested in socio-political transformation more generally.

This volume also contains case studies from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka that further contextualize experiences of local governance in Nepal. In Bangladesh, although the rich have always been able to profit from a system of interlocking networks, the dynamics of rural development for poor seem to be changing only recently. David Lewis and Abul Hossain (Chapter 11) argue that the

new development patronage has broadened both in terms of the choice of patrons and the diversity of participants. There are signs of a revitalization of local democracy being achieved through linking of local institutions with central power that open up new political spaces for marginalized groups. Such optimism is far from true in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Shandana Khan Mohmand (Chapter 15) argues that Pakistani discourse on civil society is caught in a neoliberalism that dissociates civic developmental engagement from the inconveniences of contestational politics. That the *biradaris* in Pakistan are still not free from personalised patronage points to the failure of at least two rounds of reforms of the local institutions, implemented by Zia and Musharraf. The situation is only marginally different in Sri Lanka (Chapter 16). Siri Hettige points out that parliamentarians and ministers act as conduits for channelling resources to districts and villages, bypassing local politicians and local councils and thereby weakening their grip on local governance. Ironically enough, even though power was structurally devolved to Provincial Councils, their role has been pre-empted through expansions of the functions of the central government. Hettige speculates that this centralization of power may have added to the demand by minority Tamil parties for greater political autonomy in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

The three chapters on India probe local governance from a new angle. Peter Desouza (Chapter 12) and Steffanie Strulik (Chapter 14) revisit the history of Indian decentralization in analyzing contemporary innovations. Decentralization in the colonial era in India was driven not by social or political movements concerning democracy and inclusion, but by elite concerns about governance and development. Desouza argues that the constitution of power in rural India is determined by the way customary institutions of caste and patriarchy interface with the legal institution governing land. Strulik emphasizes the centrality of gender in deliberating decentralization, especially involving the performative aspects of village assemblies. Surinder Jodhka’s essay (Chapter 13) can very well be seen as the bridge that links Volume One with Volume Two in that it offers a framework through which connections are established between the formalist discourse on the structure of local governance and the anthropological discourse on the cultural “processes” of contestations. Jodhka’s central focus is on the relational aspect of caste: “Which caste’s participation in democratic politics are we talking about?” Although anthropologists have long accepted caste as a political institution, it is still talked about in singular terms. Although good ethnographies have demonstrated constructive use of a multi-site approach, Jodhka is right in arguing that caste politics cannot be understood through single caste ethnographies; instead, we must look into multiple dimensions of caste conflict or coexistence. His three case studies from Punjab capture how the

complexities of Jat-Dalit conflict, even if they are expressed in languages of ritual purity and social hierarchy, are not free from identity politics, class rivalry, and deliberative democracy. Ethnography of caste can no longer afford to ignore any of these dimensions.

## **Vol. II: Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia**

Although Gellner does not explicitly say as much, I take it that this volume considers ethnic activism to be a new frontier in local democracy in Nepal. Five Nepali case studies are presented alongside five from elsewhere in South Asia in what I consider an innovative anthropological query of grassroots-level politics. While Volume One examined the structures of local governance, Volume Two looks at the process through which people make sense (or use) of these. In terms of methodological positioning, this Volume looks into what Baumann (1996) called the messy “demotic” discourse focusing on the “cross-cutting ties (of kinship, political affiliation, economic advantage, and so on).” The author begins by revisiting the civil society literature with a claim that ethnic and religious activism are not, *ipso facto*, “uncivil” (Varshney, 2002).

The civility of ethnic activism is the central question in Chapter 4, where Eva Gerharz discusses the Tamil diaspora who return to Jaffna, either out of their sense of belonging or charity. The roles they carve out for themselves acknowledge the inherent trade-offs but also balance the notions of transnational family with acts of brokering development. While interaction between local and “Westernized” Tamils is embedded in global discourses about culture and identity, inherent pragmatism in the way diaspora Tamils insert themselves into post-conflict Jaffna is obvious. The issue of pragmatism indeed echoes in other chapters. For example, Minoru Mio (Chapter 2) talks of the rising popularity of Gujarati songs and dance in Rajasthan as Hindu activist organisations’ learning of the new “grammar” of western Indian urban youth culture. These public events are organized by Bajrang Dals, the youth wing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), whose leaders and followers keep an arm’s length from party politics but are looking for “concrete acts” of cultural practice. While these public events may be the new proselytizing grounds for the VHP, stories of rivalries, camaraderie, and animosity among the youth leaders show that they are as active negotiators of the national Hindu activist agenda as their proselytizers. Peggy Froerer’s essay (Chapter 3) on Hindu activism among the animist tribes in Chhattisgarh and Sara Shneiderman’s work (Chapter 5) on Indian Thangmis’ “import of culture” from Nepal for the sake of strengthening claims on scheduled tribe status in India both further considers activism as an act of both charity and opportunism.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are about Dalit movements. Hugo Gorringer’s essay (Chapter 6) on the Indian state of Tamil Nadu argues that the Dalit Panther (DP) movement

consolidates Dalit identity less in terms of ethnicity or race and more in terms of class. A Dalit, for example, is said to be “a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian” (p. 147). A new movement Liberation Panthers develops a new epithet to radicalize claims of identity. Although all Dalits may join on common issues, this specific movement is considered the “house” of Paraiyars that needs to be built, just as other Dalits may build theirs. The following chapter by David Mosse (Chapter 7) reinforces the Hinduized notion of activism among the Christian Dalits, who face the double sword of being excluded from caste-based affirmative action while being targeted by Hindu extremists as ritual polluters. What sets apart Nepali Dalits from their Indian counterparts during the era of peaceful democracy is, as Laurie Vasily shows in Chapter 8, their active engagement with NGOs. During the Maoist insurgency, Dalits in Nepal found themselves isolated from both the state and civil society, leaving them utterly exposed to episodes of violence and injustice.

Chapters 9 and 10 are concerned with the historiography of Nepali ethnic activism, and offers an interesting parallel to India. Giesele Krauskopff reflects on her own role in helping Tharu intellectuals develop their claims on a Buddhist past, which they do through an opportunistic combination of academic publications with vernacular literature. Mukta Tamang’s essay on Tamang historiography (Chapter 10) can be interpreted as the fruition of such activist effort. He shows how the contemporary Tamang activism has sought to rewrite the earlier state historiography which was deliberately “silent” on Tamangs. In the final chapter, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine consolidates the book’s overall argument that the idea of “nation” has significantly changed in Nepal as ethnic groups have come to redefine their activism, in the process of which the politics of rituality is dropped in order to take up national deliberative politics.

The two volumes on the institutionality of local governance is a valuable contribution to the study of how local democracy actually operates in Nepal and in South Asia. They juxtapose the ethnographic studies of informal institutions such as ethnicity, religion, and regionalism along with the analyses of local structures and practices involving deliberative politics, civil society activism, and development. The two volumes will be of interest to social and political scientists interested in Nepal and South Asia.

*Mallika Shakyka, PhD, is an economic anthropologist trained at LSE, currently working as a Senior Lecturer in the University of Pretoria. Her research examined the role of cultural capital in Nepal’s industrialization process and the way its industrial structures are embedded within broader social and political hierarchies. Her current research focuses on the trade union movements and traders’ networks in Nepal and South Africa.*