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Review of 'At Home in the World: Globalization and the Peace Corps in Nepal' by James F. Fisher

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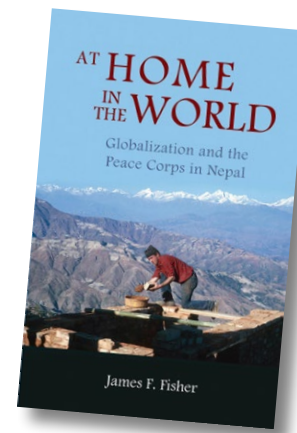
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Bagchi concludes with reflections of “Black Darjeeling” (p. 289), the theme of a student film festival, as an introspection of the darker aspects of Darjeeling by the younger generation. It is also a commentary on inter-party violent clashes, statehood demands preceding development, and the leaders’ insensitivity to the needs of common people. These reflections are supposedly representative of a large community but in actuality are extrapolations of a very small number of people.

The book is not an attempt to narrate a movement but a section of a movement for statehood, from a person who does not believe in the demand at its core. Bagchi’s account is slanted rather than an attempt to critically understand this complex historical demand. He uses narrow definitions of national identity, patriotism, state, political boundaries, and ethnicity with no attempt to view it from a larger historical landscape and recently constructed phenomena. Further, Bagchi does not debate the complexities of identity, migration, and marginalization, which for me are essential to analyse and deepen the discourse on such demands.

The discourse is oversimplified and the tone is condescending, projecting Darjeeling as a quintessential place in a time warp filled with simple people where visitors can come to rest occasionally in the “pristine grandeur in Nature and the simple people who grew up in her lap, largely untrammelled by the demands of an artificial civilization” (p. 311). This ‘pristine grandeur’ is being spoilt for the author due to the

demands made by a few middle class politicians. Conclusions like this deny the struggle for existence of an entire community in the Darjeeling Hills. The book essentially is a narrative of an anti-Gorkhaland author who makes no attempt to critically analyse the movement and draw inferences from the universal phenomenon of the struggle of marginal communities for identity and autonomy.

Bagchi in his epilogue views “the Telangana trajectory moving fast, things seem all the more uncertain for the hills” (p. 377), which is prophetic as the formation of Telangana has been endorsed by the Centre and the demand for Gorkhaland has been renewed. The Chief Executive of the GTA has resigned and an indefinite strike since the 3rd of August 2013 has created possibilities for a more in-depth and balanced commentary.

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At Home in the World: Globalization and the Peace Corps in Nepal

James F. Fisher. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2013. Pp. 212. \$26.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-9745241572.

Reviewed by Jonathan Zimmerman

James Fisher and I have a lot in common. We both served in the Peace Corps in Nepal many moons ago, and we have both returned there in the intervening years. We’re both academicians, and we’ve each written a book based in part on our own Nepal experiences. And we both see the Peace Corps as an emblem as well as an engine of a key shift in American sensibilities. Discarding the smug combination of ignorance and arrogance that characterized so much of the mid-century United States, Peace Corps volunteers embodied a freshly critical, open-minded, and culturally nuanced view of our nation and our world.

But Fisher’s view of this change is almost entirely positive, while I gave it a more mixed review. Drawing upon a fascinating set of interviews with his fellow volunteers—and on his own training as an anthropologist—Fisher paints a rich ethnography of the first Peace Corps group in Nepal, where he and 69 others arrived in 1962. His sources provide eloquent testimonies to the many ways that their years in Nepal gave them a more “globalized” perspective. My own sources—including diaries, letters, and Peace Corps evaluation reports—confirmed that trend, but added a dose of skepticism about its meaning and implications. The more

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Jonathan Zimmerman on *At Home in the World*

that Peace Corps volunteers thought about foreign “culture,” I argued, the less likely they were to intervene explicitly and purposefully in it. What gave Americans the right to impose *their* culture on anyone else? The question provided a welcome check on Americans’ historic sense of superiority, but it could also blind them to elements that they shared with their hosts. Proclaiming the need to “tolerate” or even to “protect” supposedly indigenous cultures, Peace Corps volunteers established themselves as the arbiters of what was truly native and what was not. That could preclude real exchange and admixture across these differences, even as volunteers advertised their own “global” bona fides.

But Fisher has persuaded me that my own concern was overblown, or—more precisely—outdated. Using primary documents from the 1960s and 1970s, I showed that Americans exported a rigid, totalizing conception of culture itself: each society supposedly had one culture, which imprinted itself equally upon all of its members. As Fisher’s interviews illustrate, however, Peace Corps volunteers abandoned this perspective as they *gained* perspective on their own lives and experiences. “Culture” turned out to be a much messier thing than we had previously imagined, yielding unpredictable fusions as well as tensions. Looking back on their time in Nepal, Fisher’s fellow volunteers repeatedly remark on how much they held in common with their allegedly “different” hosts. In retrospect, then, the Peace Corps story seems more like the seedbed of a new “globalized” culture than

the clash of distinct and autonomous ones.

Ironically, given our respective disciplines, Fisher’s book also follows a more conventional historical narrative than my own. He starts at the beginning, painting a collective portrait of “Nepal 1” (as his volunteer group was called) and analyzing their motives for joining the Peace Corps. Few of the volunteers had more than a cursory awareness of Nepal before they went there; indeed, thanks to a typographical error in their Peace Corps telegrams, several people thought they were going to “Naples” instead! But they learned a great deal once they arrived, as Fisher’s succeeding chapters show. He also documents how their Peace Corps years influenced their subsequent education, careers, and worldviews. Over half of the volunteers in Fisher’s group have returned to Nepal at different stages of their lives, which in itself demonstrates the enormous ongoing influence of the experience on these Americans. It “globalized” their perspective, making them much more sensitive to human diversity and variation. At the same time, though, they became more aware of the essential humanity that unites us all. Indeed, Fisher concludes, they witnessed the birth of a newly globalized world. And they have served as midwives of the same, devoting their lives to bringing different peoples and cultures into contact and conversation.

Nevertheless, I remain more sanguine about this shift than Fisher appears to be. Perhaps that’s a byproduct of my own disciplinary training as a historian, which has made me

suspicious of so-called “Whiggish” narratives in which (to borrow from the Beatles) things are Getting Better All the Time. Or it might simply reflect my own experience in Nepal, where I also returned three years ago after 25 years away. The Kathmandu Valley seemed to have globalized in the worst possible way, as hothouse urbanization and commercial growth choked the roads, rivers, and skies. Even more depressingly, what the Nepalese call *bikas* or “development” had left many young people behind; lacking any real hope of education or social mobility, they were increasingly turning to drugs and crime. But in the village where I had served, about 100 kilometers west of Pokhara, things were pretty much as I remembered them. The first guy that I met as I entered the village asked, innocently enough, “Hey, where have you been?” I introduced him to my teenaged daughter, who had come along to see where Dad used to live. For the next several days, we ate *dhaal bhat*, drank *raksi*, and talked. There wasn’t a whole lot of evidence of globalization, at least not of the Kathmandu variety. But perhaps we had globalized the moment we met, creating bonds and memories that transcended space and time. Where had I been? Across oceans and borders, schools and workplaces, making a family and a career and a life. But I was home now, in Nepal and in the world.

Jonathan Zimmerman is Professor of Education and History at New York University. He is the author of Innocents Abroad: American Teachers in the American Century (Harvard University Press, 2006).