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Review of 'Islamic Revival in Nepal: Religion and a New Nation' by Megan Adamson Sijapati

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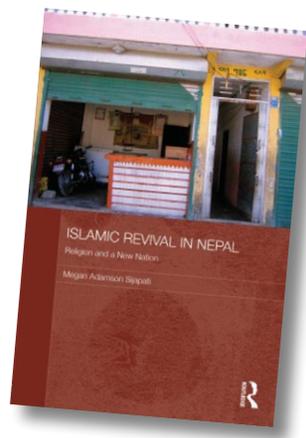


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Book Reviews



Islamic Revival in Nepal: Religion and a New Nation.

Megan Adamson Sijapati. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. Xii, 188 pages, 1 map, 5 plates. ISBN 9780415618748.

Reviewed by David N. Gellner

Muslims make up 4.4% of Nepal's population (i.e. 1,164,255 people) and they are the biggest single group in five Tarai districts (Banke, Kapilvastu, Parsa, Bara, and Rautahat). On many measures they are the most deprived of Nepal's various groups, scoring even worse than Dalits (only Madheshi Dalits do worse as a group: UNDP 2009: 43-4). Yet both Nepalis and scholars of Nepal are relatively very ignorant about Nepali Muslims. Two of Sijapati's informants told her that by studying the community she was taking up a valuable task that they themselves ought to have attempted, and they expressed the hope that the Muslims of Nepal would be better known thanks to her work. I agree: this is an important book, if only because of the veil of ignorance that covers the internal dynamics of Nepal's various Muslim communities and organizations.

Islamic Revival in Nepal has, broadly, three parts: (i) introductory material sketching the history and internal divisions of Muslim Nepalis; (ii) a detailed account the tragic and pivotal events of 'Kalo Buddhvar' (as she transcribes it), i.e. 'Black Wednesday', and reactions to it; (iii) descriptions

of the different approaches of two Muslim organizations, the National Muslim Forum and the Islami Sangh Nepal. The first part may be familiar to some specialists, thanks to the work of Marc Gaborieau, but the other two sections contain very valuable new material, with careful reporting of Muslim voices and analyses of Muslim discourses, using both oral and written materials.

On August 30th, 2004, an extremist group in Iraq called Ansar al-Sunna seized twelve Nepali migrant workers. On the following day video clips of their beheadings became available on the internet. Violence started in Kathmandu in the middle of the night and for the whole of September 1st rioters attacked Muslim businesses, manpower agencies (responsible for sending Nepalis to the Middle East), and mosques. They trashed the mosques and urinated on and burned Korans. One man died outside the Egyptian Embassy, and, according to US Embassy reports, up to seven people died in all (p. 55). Clearly, the death toll could have been much higher. Without emphasizing the point, Sijapati records testimonies that many Muslims were protected by their Hindu and Buddhist neighbours.

"Photographs taken of the mosque destruction on Kalo Buddhvar", Sijapati notes, "bear an eerie resemblance to those of Hindu perpetrators destroying the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992" (pp. 57-58). Thus Sijapati, quite rightly, connects the events of Kalo Buddhvar

to what Paul Brass (2003) has called the 'riot system' in north India, by which politicians deliberately foment riots (as in August 2013 in Muzzafarnagar, U.P.) in order to firm up their communal vote base before an election. She juxtaposes discussion of Hindu-Muslim riots in India with the doubts expressed by her Muslim informants about how rioting could go on for so long, on the biggest road of the city, right next to the royal palace, without some coordination or tacit support from those in power. Without explicitly expressing it herself, she leads the reader to the conclusion that King Gyanendra, or those in his circle, may have been playing with Hindutva in order to improve his own shaky position, which he was to lose less than two years later.

The events of Kalo Buddhvar impressed on Nepali Muslims with renewed and shocking force the fact that they are perceived by the majority population as an 'other' or 'internal enemy' par excellence; that they could be blamed for events thousands of miles away that were not even specifically directed against Hindus or against Nepalis. It was not the first anti-Muslim violence in Nepal, as Mollica Dastider (2000) has documented (serious riots have occurred since in Kapilvastu in September 2007). But it was the first and so far only serious riot of this sort in the capital.

The final section of the book examines the two most prominent

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David Gellner on *Islamic Revival in Nepal: Religion and a New Nation*

revivalist organizations, the National Muslim Forum and the Islami Sangh Nepal. Both of them, while aiming to be inclusive and not to exclude particular schools of Muslim thought, are in fact exclusive, in the sense that they are opposed to saint worship and even more opposed to the Ahmadiyya claim to be Muslim. Ironically, therefore, they are keen to invoke Nepal's legal provisions against inducements to conversion, which were originally designed to prevent conversions from Hinduism to Islam and Christianity. We are not told the extent to which the personnel of these two reformist organizations overlap, but there is clearly a division of labour whereby the former attempts to build political unity within Nepal and the latter concentrates on religious reform, with no attempt to be involved in politics. What is fascinating is that, as in other parts of South Asia, Muslims construct themselves as a unitary and in principle transnational community with no links to local territory and specifically as *not* indigenous. This self-construction is largely accepted by others (they form a single census category). Thus, despite the fact that there are manifold internal social and sectarian divisions and despite the fact that they are constrained to work within the framework of the nation-state, Muslims are considered, as in India and Sri Lanka, to form a single ethnic category.

Sijapati helpfully traces out the similarities with reform movements in India and Pakistan, inspired by

the work of Sayyid Abul ala Mawdudi (1903-1979). Without explicitly acknowledging their debt, reformist Nepali Muslims are attempting to put into practice his program, minus the political aspirations. There are hints of conflict between the Tablighi Jama'at, which is also active in Nepal, and the Islami Sangh. There is a social reform agenda as well, since the reformists stand *for* widow remarriage and *against* dowry, thereby once again defining themselves as the opposite of Hindus.

Unfortunately there are some slips and typos, especially in the introductory part of the book, which betray its origins in an insufficiently reworked PhD thesis. *Caturvarnasram* does not mean 'the five punishments' (p. 33). The Rana Prime-ministerial system does not date from 1852 but from 1846 and Jang Bahadur was Prime Minister not Chief Minister. She writes, "the technical term in Nepali is *madesi*, lit. 'people of the plains,' but the colloquial form is *madhesi*" (p. 25). Manjushree is not a goddess (p. 152n54). The Malla kings were overthrown in the 18th, not the 16th century (p. 21). 'Hachhethu' appears as 'Hacchetu', 'Höfer' as 'Hofer', and 'Biratnagar' as 'Bhiratnagar' throughout. Dharan is not a city on the Nepal-India border (p. 68) and Pokhara is not normally represented as being in the north of Nepal (p. 12).

Islamic Revival in Nepal does not attempt to be a detailed ethnography of lived Islam (there are only two pages

on women and their involvement), nor even a detailed ethnography of meetings and organization-building. However, it does include careful analysis of discourses, with attention paid to the precise Urdu vocabulary used. As such, it is a very valuable book and an important contribution to Nepal and Himalayan studies, one that gives voice to a marginalized group of people; it should be read by everyone who cares about the future of the region.

David N. Gellner is Professor of Social Anthropology and a Fellow of All Souls College, University of Oxford. He has worked on the anthropology of Nepal for over three decades. His monograph (with Sarah LeVine), *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal* (Harvard U.P.) was published in 2005; an edited volume, *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia* (Duke U.P.) appeared in 2013; his article, 'The 2013 Elections in Nepal', *Asian Affairs* 2014, is available at <<http://bit.ly/1pe2hal>>.

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