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BOOK REVIEWS


Very little is known about the ethnic groups of Nepali origin settled in Darjeeling. In standard academic discourses these discrete ethnic groups are treated as mere caste groups within the generic category of Gorkha or Nepali community. Given this predicament, most anthropological and sociological studies conducted in the past have focused solely on the issues of collective Gorkha identity and virtually neglected the historical constitution of exclusive ethnic identities in Darjeeling. However, given the recent upsurge of these ethnic identities both in India and Nepal a lot of academic attention has been channeled to understand these discrete groups and their claims to distinct culture, history, and identity. Despite being a popular topic of investigation among anthropologist and scholars, a decisive ethnographic account comparing ethnic activism in Nepal and India was lacking to this day. In this regard the present book by Shneiderman is a departure from the standard anthropological studies on ethnic groups of the Himalayan region. The book is a novel enterprise as it adopts multi-sited ethnography to compare ethnic activism of Thami or Thangmi community in both India and Nepal. The book charts the basic trajectory of the struggle launched by the Thangmi for recognition and highlights in details the transnational flow of cultural forms and instrumental framing of identities in performative spaces through ritualised and processual actions.

Adopting a multi-sited ethnography of the Thangmi/Thami community in both India and Nepal the book provides a compelling glimpse of the community and their associated narratives about their culture interwoven with their migration history and their present predilection to reinvigorate and restore their traditions and cultural practices. One of the most interesting facts about the book is the author’s admission of her role as an anthropologist complicit in the ethnic revitalisation among the Thangmis of Darjeeling demanding recognition as schedule tribe. Exploring these vexed issues the eight chapters of the book provide a rich account of the ethnic revival practices and highlights in detail the multifarious ways in which ethnic identities are forged through public performances of cultural heritage.

For Shneiderman then ‘Thangmi cultural content is largely contained in the intangible, internally coherent aspects of ritualised action rather than in any tangible, externally recognisable visual form’ (p. 12). Comparing these ritualised actions both in India and Nepal Shneiderman makes a crucial distinction between the ritualised actions carried out as part of their traditional repertoire which she calls as ‘practice’ and the public enactments of ritualised actions carried in broader discursive context, which she calls as ‘performance’ (p. 37). Eliciting interesting insights from her rich ethnographic work Shneiderman describes both these forms of actions as mutually constitutive and describes both these forms of actions as mutually constitutive and essential aspect of Thangmi’s cultural reproduction. Charting ethnic activism within a discourse saturated by affective sense of belonging and political assertion of rights, Shneiderman provides a crucial reading of the different framing strategies and techniques adopted by Thangmis to re-cast and objectify their identities and attain authenticity through performances.
Shneiderman uses her expertise as an avid anthropologist to provide telling accounts of two Thangmi Gurus who anchor Thangmi’s ritual practices and play a crucial role in circulating ideas about their identity. Exploring the contemporary repertoire of Thangmi activism she presents a detail account of the ways in which myths and rituals assume an objective form through modes of textualization and scripturalization which transform oral narratives into written accounts which are then actively deployed and circulated in wider social and political contexts. Through a meticulous engagement with both historical and oral narratives, the book provides a compelling reading of the issue of belonging and migration of Thangmis. Drawing from her extensive fieldwork in Darjeeling and TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region) Shneiderman argues that for Thangmis sense of belonging emerges from their experience of circular migration.

Highlighting this aspect she writes, ‘Thangminess has become grounded in a transnational economy of belonging in which experiences of, or at the very least, knowledge of the particularities of multiple locations makes one’s identity complete’ (p. 106). The book also offers detailed historical accounts of Thangmi associations both in Darjeeling and Nepal and maps its convoluted trajectories both intercepted and augmented by the political processes unfolding in Nepal and India. Most significantly the book offers an empirical description of the cross-border communication of Thangmi associations and their role in conceptualising a pristine and authentic Thangmi culture and identity. The book captures several important dimensions of Thangmi’s social and ritual universe, in particular the discussion on Suspa Bhupe temple and its relevance in embodying the cultural identity of the Thangmi is crucial as it reveals how appropriation of cultural artifacts and monuments of historic and religious importance transcends national boundaries. Immersed in the ethnographic details of rituals practices like the Devikot-Khadga Jatra the book offers interesting discussions on the concept of hybridity in Thangmi identity.

Methodologically, analytically and theoretically the book is a feast of ethnographic enquiry and an excellent example of the multi-sited ethnography in the South Asian context. By weaving personal accounts with the ethnographic details of the life cycle rituals of the Thangmis the book offers crucial insights to rethink and reimagine the notions of field and subjects embodied in the regular canons of anthropological enquiry. The greatest achievement of the book seems to be its simple, lucid, penetrating, and rich language, shifting between the descriptions of two distinct field sites characterised by its own geopolitical and historical specificities, the books weaves specific case histories to vivid descriptions on the contemporary life of the community located in translocal setting. The book is a testimony to author’s long and dexterous ethnographic work and will stand as an exemplar for researchers willing to adopt multi-sited ethnography as a method of enquiry. With penetrating analysis, deep theoretical insights coupled with rich ethnographic details the book provides a humane reading of Thangmis who are engaged in a relentless struggles to assert their identity in contemporary time.

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