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Sara Shneiderman

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The power of Buddhist homelands: secularism, space and sovereignty

Sara Shneiderman

Department of Anthropology and School of Public Policy & Global Affairs, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

This Afterword draws the essays in this special collection together by highlighting how the ‘Buddhist Homeland’ imaginary can be mobilized to advance the agendas of marginalized communities in non-Buddhist state and diasporic spaces. Buddhist practices and identities may be seen as acceptable forms of counter-hegemonic practice, which are not perceived to challenge sovereignty itself in the way that other forms of mobilization from below may. This is in part due to the often deterritorialized nature of Buddhist networks themselves, making it possible to separate claims of belonging to Buddhist places from political claims to sovereignty over specific territorial spaces.

KEYWORDS

Secularism; sovereignty; diaspora; territoriality; nation-state; marginalized communities; citizenship

‘Homeland’ may be at once an idea and a place, a discourse and a production, a rubric for inclusion and exclusion. The essays in this special issue illustrate how diverse communities across mainland South Asia – in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh – creatively engage with this expansive and sometimes contradictory concept to forge their own sense of belonging. Each essay addresses a specific ethnographic and/or historical context through detailed empirical material and original analysis. They also work together effectively to tell a broader geopolitical story about the relationships between religion and territory at individual, community, and regional scales.

In each of the research contexts we encounter, ‘Buddhist’ religiosity, and/or the Buddha as a historical figure, become powerful platforms for people marginalized by the nation-state to build their own identity claims. Notably, this collection does not include pieces about Bhutan, Burma, or Sri Lanka – the three historically Buddhist states in the region. I’d like to suggest that this is not a bug, but rather a feature inherent in the shared orientation of the scholarship featured here: all of the authors describe communities for whom the notion of a Buddhist homeland is powerful precisely because that reality is not embodied in the political structure of the nation-state with which they have closest ties. Rather, they are minoritized within the erstwhile secular states of India and Nepal, and the formally Muslim state of Bangladesh. While the Buddhist homeland concept is surely relevant for understanding historical and contemporary Bhutan, Burma, and Sri Lanka as well, this would require a shift in perspective to recognize it as a tool of hegemonic power from above, rather than as a tool of resistance from below. The essays in this collection resonate so strongly with each other because all of their cases embody the latter understanding.

Recognizing this commonality across the essays under discussion here sets the stage for a focused consideration of how, when wielded by the marginalized, Buddhist homeland rhetoric can productively challenge statist visions of secularism and sovereignty. A complementary discussion of the ways in which Buddhist homeland ideologies have been marshalled to serve the purposes of

authoritarian and often violently exclusive states is beyond the scope of this Afterword – however it is essential to acknowledge that this is the darker side of the same coin.

India has been constitutionally secular since 1950.¹ But in recent years, this commitment has come under increasing scrutiny as Hindutva leadership at the national level has advocated other forms of legislation – such as the Citizenship Amendment Act – that explicitly differentiate among citizens on the basis of religion.² Nepal, by contrast, only transitioned from its long-standing position as the world's only Hindu constitutional monarchy to a secular federal republic in 2006, in the wake of a post-conflict peace process and people's movement. Yet there remains significant pushback against the idea of secularism.³ These ideas gained a foothold in the eventual promulgation of the 2015 constitution, which both establishes Nepal as secular and offers special protections for *sanatan dharma*, understood as 'ancient' or 'traditional' religion.

In both of these state contexts, Buddhism becomes a counter-hegemonic identity that can challenge Hindu religious orthodoxies embedded in the state project. Buddhist identities articulate the limits of secularism in both the Indian and Nepali polities, yet in a way that is more acceptable to the state than the categorically dangerous 'other' that Muslim identities are understood to be in India, or that *adivasi janajati* (Indigenous nationalities) and *madhesi* (regional minority resident along the Tarai southern border with India) identities are conceptualized as in Nepal.⁴

In India, these dynamics are illustrated effectively in the essays by Ayyathurai and Gohain. Both authors discuss identity-based movements, albeit in vastly different parts of India, where Buddhism becomes a valuable counter-narrative to Hindu orthodoxy through place-based mobilization. Ayyathurai shows how Tamil Buddhists draw upon long-standing modes of linguistic activism to produce a 'multilingual vernacular Buddhism' that served as a conduit for anti-caste mobilization in the 18th and 19th centuries that still resonates today. Gohain shows how the geographical label of 'Himalayan' becomes a valuable political qualifier when attached to the term 'Buddhist' to create a pan-Indian montane identity, from east to west. She argues that the relatively recent push to do so is in part a response to geopolitical dynamics between India and China, especially as the Dalai Lama ages and an independent Tibet becomes seen as a less and less likely target of aspiration. Instead, those who might have affiliated themselves with the Tibetan cause in earlier generations now seek belonging within the Indian nation-state. Both cases show how Buddhist homeland rhetoric can claim space for secularism through the active assertion of non-Hindu religious practices in the public domain – yet without posing a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the Indian nation-state itself.

Hennigar's contribution complements these two pieces by shifting focus from Buddhist identities defined by caste, language, ethnicity or region – as in the essays discussed above – to those shaped by lineage and sectarian differences. At Nagaloka, we see how globally circulating ideologies of Buddhist commonality intersect with nationally specific notions of an 'Indian Buddhism'. We see how Buddhist interpretations of Indian nationalism are forged through daily practice at Nagaloka; and come to understand that Indian and international Buddhist ideologies are not the same. These different understandings of what Buddhism is collide as diverse students and teachers come together in the space of the centre itself – which offers a different vision of what a Buddhist homeland produced through practice itself might look like – regardless of its geographical or political location.

The theme of global connectivity as a powerful force that shapes ideas of belonging – alongside local and national claims to sovereignty – is continued in Dennis' exploration of the 'Buddha Was Born in Nepal' claim through diasporic social media production. She shows how three Nepali bloggers based outside of Nepal use this trope to develop their own microcelebrity brand identities, as well as their sense of citizenship and belonging to a far away homeland. If the Buddha's birthplace can become a symbol of nationalist passion for those far away from it in the Nepali diasporas of the UK and US – who may not even identify themselves as Buddhists in the religious sense – then we need to reframe our conceptualizations of secularism, space, and sovereignty to accommodate a much more expansive sense of 'homeland' in the ideational sense.

Finally, D. Mitra Barua shifts our attention to Bangladesh, at its border with Burma/Myanmar in the region of Arakan. Here, a different relationship pertains between religion and the state: Islam is the state religion, yet the country remains a secular republic.⁵ These ambiguities shape the context in which the particular relations between ethnicity, geography, and religious identity for Bengali-speaking Buddhists in the Chittagong region have been encoded through the social categories of ‘Mog’ and ‘Maga’. Through a careful reading of locally-produced histories, the author shows how the primary concern for community members themselves shifted from geographical to ethnic markers of belonging over time. Their own narrative was challenged by colonial ones, and the author seeks to disentangle these different trajectories of meaning making over time.

The material presented here is very important in understanding the histories of these contested places on their own terms: these regions have not been at the centre of the postcolonial map or state-making, and have therefore been open to repeated re-narrativization by both their inhabitants, and others who might seek to control them. In this sense, Barua’s argument resonates with Gohain’s discussion of Indian Himalayan Buddhist identities. The protagonists in both essays seek to recuperate historical tropes of belonging that pre-date contemporary nation-state borders to advance alternative visions of the relationships between religious, political, and geographical belonging that allow space for Buddhist citizens to both be themselves, and be part of a larger polity on their own terms.

Taken as a whole, then, the essays in this collection prompt a deeper understanding of how imaginaries of Buddhist homelands may enable solidarity building for marginalized groups within South Asian polities that in theory adhere to secularism. Buddhist practices and identities may be seen as acceptable forms of counter-hegemonic practice, which are not perceived to challenge sovereignty itself in the way that other forms of mobilization from below may. This is in part due to the often deterritorialized nature of Buddhist networks themselves, making it possible to separate claims of belonging to Buddhist places from political claims to sovereignty over specific territorial spaces.

Notes

1. See Bhargava, *Secularism and its Critics*; Iqtidar and Sarkar, *Tolerance, Secularization, and Democratic Politics in South Asia*.
2. A series of essays in *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* provides a helpful overview of these issues: <https://polarjournal.org/2020/09/07/indias-citizenship-amendment-act-caa/>.
3. See Gellner et al., *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal*.
4. This is in part due to population numbers. Muslims account for between 13–15% of India’s population, while Buddhists are under 1% (https://censusindia.gov.in/census_and_you/religion.aspx). In Nepal Buddhists comprise 9% of the population, while *adivasi janajati* are over 35% and *madhesi* nearly 20% (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/documents/Nepal/Nepal-Census-2011-Vol1.pdf>).
5. Islam, “Secularism in Bangladesh.”

Disclosure statement

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