**Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia (Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action Series, Vol. 2)**

David N. Gellner (editor)

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**Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action Series, Vol. 3)**

David N. Gellner (editor)

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Civil society is typically regarded as a social domain outside the state, the market, and the family. Yet the essays in these two volumes, edited by an eminent anthropologist of Nepal, argue for a more nuanced and complex understanding of “civil society” that accommodates competing ideologies, ethnic divisions, and even kinship relations. Drawing on case studies from across South Asia, these volumes present a novel anthropological account of civil society, which helps us appreciate the blurred boundaries between ethnic and civic activism, global and local advocacy, and nongovernmental institutions (NGOs) and the developmental state. Rightwing Hindu associations in central India and Maoist rebels in Nepal are thus analyzed as civil society actors as much as NGOs and environmentalists in the region. These two books, therefore, set a new benchmark for the study of social activism and civil society in South Asia and elsewhere.

There is much to be gained from such an anthropological understanding of civil society activism. It permits us to move from reified theoretical concepts towards finer-grained empirical knowledge about actually existing civil societies in an economically and politically vibrant region. The essays by Minoru Mio, Peggy Froerer, Ane de Sales, and Sara Schneiderman on social mobilization by extreme right- and left-wing organizations enable us to view “civil society” less as a placid, consensus-driven domain than as a contested political space where rival notions of the common good intersect with each other. This is not only a more realistic view of civil society in much of the world, but one that extends our understanding of democracy beyond elections and legislatures. Similarly, in the essays by Stefanie Strulik, David Mosse, and Siripala Hettige, we get a practical sense of the everyday challenges for Indian women, ex-untouchable castes, and Sinhala youth to participate politically on par with their male, upper-caste, and Westernized superiors in society. Here, we come face to face with the workings of power in highly stratified societies, and how ordinary men and women collectively resist and negotiate these power relations. An anthropology of social activism, therefore, leads us away from dominant theories of civil society that idealize or romanticize it.

An anthropology of activism also leads us to rethink the relationship between civil society and the modern state. In classical liberal theory, civil society is assumed to be a counterweight to the state and its top-down mechanisms. Even in recent theoretical formulations of a “third way,” civil society actors are taken as distinct from both the state and the market. These liberal and neo-liberal assumptions do not, however, stand critical scrutiny in these volumes. The essays by David Lewis and Celayne Heaton Shrestha on NGOs and the state in Bangladesh and Nepal point to the shared discourses of “development” among activists and bureaucrats as well as their similar social backgrounds. Neither the state nor civil society is politically neutral despite their best efforts to pose as such. Their policy initiatives, unsurprisingly, reflect clear modernist prejudices that project the subjects of development as backward and uncivil. As such, civil society, as much as the state, can reproduce existing structures of social power in these countries. At the same time, however, activism by historically-excluded *janjati* (“tribal” or “indigenous”) and *dalit* (formerly “untouchable”) groups entails making claims on the state and even seeking to capture state power. In these cases, as the essays by Sara Schneiderman, Mukta Tamang, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Gisèle Krauskopff, and Laurie Ann Vasily show, civil society does challenge existing power structures, but within, not outside, the domain of the state. Often, transnational linkages amplify the effects of such ethnic activism by minorities: not only do these transnational ties offer new resources for building organizational networks and generating new forms of activist knowledge and capabilities, they also directly alter state discourses and policies with respect to previously neglected minority communities. While the effects of social activism may reinforce or challenge existing power relations, the state is hardly a neutral entity standing above a fractious society. It is, instead, very much at the centre of the social conflicts that characterize civil society.

If there is a weakness in these two excellent volumes, it lies in the relative lack of discussion of the market and its relationship to civil society in South Asia. It is true that some contributors correlate the rise of NGOs with the triumph of economic liberalization and globalization in the region over the past two decades. But how are liberalization and globalization related to the growth of civil society? The rich ethnographic evidence put before us in these volumes do not let us simply follow the banal yet commonplace explanation that the state has receded significantly to cede space to corporate capital and NGOs alike. The essays in these volumes see civil society as far more intimately intertwined with the postcolonial state than most theorists of civil society imagine. Might we see civil society as similarly intertwined with the market? In Arjun Gunaratne’s essay on middle-class environmental activism in Sri Lanka, for instance, we see how the postcolonial elite in that country has adapted itself recently to the logics and languages of neoliberal capital in relation to wildlife conservation. Older patterns of colonial class formation are thus reinforced by more recent ones. In Nepal, however, the influx of foreign NGOs has coincided with the rise of *janjati* activism among groups such as the Magars, Tamangs, and Thangmi. Here, entrenched hierarchies of caste and class are being threatened by upwardly-mobile leaders of indigenous communities with the aid of transnational NGO networks. Interestingly, even the Maoist insurgency in Nepal has upheld the legitimacy of indigenous activism against traditional domains of royal and brahminical privilege. The market, much like the state, thus seems to be related to civil society in rather counterintuitive ways: while neoliberal regimes of capital can reinforce older class divisions in society, they can also shape resistance by civil society to entrenched domains of privilege.

In sum, the essays in these two volumes suggest that economic liberalization and globalization may be deepening conflicts within the realm of civil society, and in turn, restructuring the state to reflect the evolving balance of power in society. If so, the implications of these volumes go significantly beyond what the editor and contributors state explicitly. Civil society, far from being a political neutral domain uncorrupted by the state and the market, may actually be embedded in them even as it carries the potential to transform both. Not only might civil society activism limit the scope of state and market actions in significant ways, it may actually drive these actions towards policy objectives that reflect the peculiar constellation of social forces that dominate at a particular time and place. Such a clear-eyed understanding of civil society and social activism dispels much of the mythology that has enveloped these terms in recent times. Civil society may not be the panacea to all social ills, but it is also not the insidious villain its critics make it out to be.

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