

BOOK REVIEW

Title: A Project of Memoriality: Transnational Development and Local Activism

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Shaubhagya Shah was one of the promising Nepali anthropologists who is no longer with us because of his untimely demise. This book is the outcome of his Ph.D. thesis that he submitted at the Harvard University in 2002 for which he had conducted research from November 1998 till July 2000 in Viman, Sindhuli district of Nepal. This book has come up with the introduction, reflecting, representing and illuminating the content of the book, by prominent sociologist Professor Chaitanya Mishra. In addition, it contains seven chapters. Though the thesis was submitted almost two decades ago, considering its novelty in theoretical and methodological domain, I believe that still the book very much justifies its publication and thus its review as well.

This book clearly contains main quotes in different places about what this book/chapter is dealing on. A reader can easily sense about what he is dealing on in the book in the very first paragraph, when he examines:

The process by which the women came to form an organization and the particular issues they deployed this forum for. The women's activities and engagements through the new organization are interpreted as efforts to construct women's agency and identity in a largely patriarchal setting that denies women public recognition and historical presence (p.1).

The first chapter of the book deals about his theoretical position and the methodology he has employed in carrying out the study in which the book was based on. Second chapter elaborates about the place, people and the issues of the study area. Amidst this, he has portrayed the nostalgia of the women in the bygone days and the foundation for the emergence of Mahila Karyakari, Women's Executive, the women's association which

played pivotal role in grounding these women's local activism. The third chapter is all about contextualizing Viman (the study site) women, in light of women's situation in general in Nepal. He examines 'how women have been culturally defined in Nepal and how that affects their economic position'. He demystifies and questions the certain granted academic myths such as the agentive nature of women of ethnic groups and juxtaposing them in relation to that of the patriarchy influenced suppressed situation of caste Hindu groups. The book shows the criticality of empirical evidence in making comparison and judgments.

Women's participation in the political process and its implications in cultural sphere have been dealt in chapter four. While doing so, he shows that Viman women's modernization and development is linked with up to the regional and international level in the sphere of political, intellectual and economic domains. He further claims that women's development in Nepal did not emerge in isolation within Nepal. In such context, the term *Mahila* has become a symbol and reflection of modernizing civic state surpassing other terminologies such as *Nari* and *Stri*. With a catchy heading- 'global discourse, local practices', chapter five presents how development and women's empowerment has manifested in Viman through the activities of Women's Development Section (WDS). Even beyond the intervention and its ambition, development process has empowered women to claim their space also in the public domain, conventionally regarded as a taboo for them, expanded their opportunity to talk to strangers and even among themselves, be conscious and raise voice about women's concerns which might be easily overlooked by their and society and community. Their journey outside their village opened up the wider world to them, expanded their imagination belonging and solidarity beyond their locale. Chapter six has further highlighted on the unintended consequences of WDS activities, which have expanded women's agentive capacity in the study area.

I have found that this is one of the few books that lure me to go through till I finish it. While going through this, I have found some remarkable contributions, which this monograph provides. Prevailing academic orthodoxy, widely and mainly available in some academic institutions in Nepal, demand to have a separate chapter for literature review as if it is a standalone document. Shah does not comply with such conventions and rather we can find that the literatures he had engaged are embedded in different chapters as and when he had found them relevant. Professor Mishra rightly summarizes the way he has used literature review

to “illuminate, juxtapose, interrogate and support the perspectives utilized, observations made, and findings that come through” (p. xviii). He gradually moves on from general literature in the field (e.g. about the women’s agency) then moves towards the specific literatures that deal (or not) about women’s agency in Nepal and puts forth his claim that agency need to be locally rooted.

Instead of portraying his research as white brushed to conceal the upheavals and complexities of met during the process of unfolding of the research, he has also clearly made some confessions about the downside of his study. The fundamental flaws lied in his naïve assumption before going to the field in approaching the women’s agentive behaviors was that economic liberalization might have empowered women to involve on movement against alcohol. Immersing in the field setting, he realized the need to rephrase his research questions and adjust analytic lens considering the ‘national and international linkages and flows that opened up a new space for the local women and the local historical process that informed the women’s response’ (p.21). Likewise, he has clearly put forth two initial hurdles in the fieldwork as a man doing a research on women and feeling of “insider” and “outsider” in different occasions. He has lucidly presented how he overcome these inevitable experience of doing ethnographic researches through the process of rapport building over the period of fieldwork and their implication for his information generation.

To amuse many ethnographers who are very much conscious about maintaining the privacy and secrecy of research participants, Shah has frequently used the real name and identifier of his research participants upon their expressed desire to be recognized and inscribed in the text. One can see their aspiration to be inscribe oneself through socially enduring legacies (p.7) reflected even in the very title of the book itself. His sympathy to the study population, the women of Viman, echoes his axiological position of critical social science approach that he had not confined himself to a value neutral knower rather a researcher looking for transformative perspective. He has consciously, in line with his study subjects, projected the agentive nature of Viman women who have been looking for space even in the domain which has contributed as a solid foundation for the perpetuation of patriarchy, for instance, through Teej song.

What I have found fascinating about his study is his logic of selection of the research site. Through newspapers he heard about the

movement against alcohol which had been strong and relatively sustained in Viman area. Unfamiliarity of the setting is another reason that made him curious to explore the area and the people. Very ordinary place, which could have been a strong reason for many ethnographers not to turn towards there, both for the Nepali and the foreigners, attracted him to select the place. In fact, this simple fact that the ordinary Nepali rural setting, makes his research very special in terms of representing the Nepali society in general and Nepali women's lived story in particular. Looking for exoticism, many anthropologists, conventionally, mainly the foreigners, had disproportionately dedicated their studies in certain ethnic groups. Such studies have forcefully dichotomized Nepali society into Hindu and non-Hindu categories. For Shah, such strategy does not represent the ground reality of Nepali society. As he has exemplified, there are many occasions such as anti-alcohol movement, which makes women from both the groups stand together. Therefore, he consciously shifted in choosing the study population from the study of one ethnic (caste) group to the lived reality of blurred boundaries between groups of caste/ethnic mosaic and their collective concern. Though some of the ethnic leaders and activist such as Gore Bahadur Khapangi refuted with such movement but such movement in Viman was not only of Brahmin-Chhetri women rather that of women from different ethnic groups, shows that beyond caste/ethnicity, there are other threads in the social life of people which bind them together in the typicality of Nepali society.

Shah is successful in presenting the agency of Viman women rooted in their structural context. He has clearly portrayed that agencies of actors are not detached from the social structure rather they are embedded into that. One cannot underestimate the implications of the Maoist insurgency in muting the voices and acts of these rural and largely the illiterate folks of the women. However, empowered with the support of international development agencies such as Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) through its formation of the women's groups but transcending its intension and intervention, Viman women devised their effective agency even in that kind of unfavorable situation. When declaring their verdict about the unidentified empregnator of *Lati*, a dumb girl, these women equated their decisions with that of the metaphor and imagery of Maoist war in which the latter provided justice to the needy and powerless. I have found that Shah has jubilantly described different micro level incidents to support his main argument and linking them with larger societal picture, through micro-

macro analysis, and powerfully presenting them with the flavor of the sets of theory he employs.

He concludes with the arguments that the surfacing of Mahila Karyakari in Viman exemplifies “how the political, economic and cultural conditions under which global and local intentions and projects come together can also diverge along various axes” (p.224). The plural manifestation and consequences are neither anticipated nor are they straightforwardly identified. Amidst such intricacies, it can be safely and clearly claimed that the outside resources, authenticity and recognition can support the local actors to renegotiate the “immediate structures of power to open up spaces to inscribe themselves as historical subjects” (p.224). Wrapped up with such conclusions, I have found that Shah’s book is a master piece of writing in portraying the situation of Nepali women from a specific time and space. In terms of innovative nature of the topic, lucid presentation of the research methodology employed in the research process, beautifully weaved field data with the secondary and theoretical literatures, abstractions made at the pile of the grounded data makes a reader content with the book as a bundle of arresting ethnography.

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