

BOOK REVIEW

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BOOK REVIEW: Sijapati, Megan Adamson. 2012. *Islamic Revival in Nepal, Religion and a New Nation*. Oxon: Routledge. pages xi+ 188.

Islamic identity in a hitherto Hindu Nepal has evoked more than a passing interest amongst the South Asia watchers. Comprising a 4.39% of the total Nepali Population as per the census of 2011, Muslims form the second largest minorities (after the Buddhists) in this country. It has been observed that their self description has undergone changes in the post secularized republican Nepal. Hence the significance of the work under review: *Islamic Revival in Nepal* by Megan Adamson Sijapati (2012: Oxon, Routledge).

Divided into seven chapters and spread across 188 pages, the author acknowledges the use of the term 'revivalism' risks 'limitations and over determination' (p5). The author proceeds to unravel the various factors that influence Islamic identity in what turns out to be mainly in Kathmandu valley, and not in Nepal as a whole(as promised in the title), in the aftermath of a violent episode in 2004 known as Kalo Budhwar (black Wednesday). As a reaction to the killing of 12 Nepali migrant workers in Iraq by a militant Islamist group, Ansar al- Sunna, violence against the Muslims erupted in Kathmandu. This prompted 'segments of Muslim population' to embark upon a 'revival of Islam' (p132), especially through a Sunni revivalist approach to religious tradition. The current work under review is an attempt to analyse this phenomenon.

The book is largely based on field work in Kathmandu, during 2005-6, 2008 and 2009-10 which was a period of significant change in Nepalese history in terms of political as well as socio- cultural dimensions. Politically this change was most significant. Nepal switched over from Monarchy to Republicanism and from a the status of being a Hindu State to a Secular State. Under these circumstances the socio- cultural landscape of Nepal, especially in terms of 'visibility' of the Muslim population of the country, too underwent a considerable change. The book undertakes the task of unraveling the past of Muslim communities in Nepal and then goes on to

undertake an in depth research on the two major Islamic organizations of Nepal: 'The National Muslim Forum' (Rashtriya Muslim Manch) and the 'Islami Sangh' that were established in June 2005.

The book provides a fairly layered account of the history of the Muslim population of Nepal. Also valuable is the portrayal of the heterogeneity of the community that can be placed under various geographic categories like the Kashmiri Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, Tarai Muslims, Muslims of the hills, and Nepali Muslims. However how these diverse categories are different from each other finds scanty analysis. Besides the geographic categorization exists the cultural identities: Ahl-e Hadis, Doebandhis, Barelvis, Jamat 'I Islami, Ahmadias and the Hannafis, (Chapter 2) that have been critically explained. Chapter 3 traces the narrative of Hindu national purity and Muslim alterity, a phenomenon that is common in most of south Asia. The Kalo Budhvar episode is examined against the background thus portrayed, mainly in the light of 'revivalism' of Muslim identity in chapter 4. In chapters 5 and 6 respectively the author examines the establishment and evolution of the 'National Muslim Forum'(Rashtriya Muslim Manch Nepal) and the Muslim 'The Islami Sangh' Nepal. Chapter 5 enumerates the various ways in which the National Muslim Forum's call for a unified Nepali Muslim Nation defines a unified Muslim identity and chapter 6 concludes that the Islami Sangh is working to forge a 'discursively oriented' Islamic tradition in Nepal.

Not only the diverse levels of connectivity that Islamic identity of Nepal has with the rest of the Muslim world been identified but also tensions amongst the various competing claims between Hinduism vs Secularism, Hills vs. plains, and Monarchy vs. Republicanism have been brought out well in the volume. The local and global processes that shape them are also focused on. Connection is attempted to link this phenomenon with the similar development in India during the nineteenth and the twentieth century, when the Indian schools of Islamic thought such as the Deobandh were 'responding to the experience of powerlessness, conflict and contestation in the context of British colonial rule'. The work under review is certainly valuable in as much as it traces these aspects of Islamic society in Nepal.

However the author herself acknowledges the cultural contrast that she witnessed between the valley Muslims and the Muslims of Pokhara (p 19) and also that many Muslims are reluctant to submit to definitions. There is ample evidence in Nepal to show that Muslims in the country have a large shared cultural and religious space with the Hindus. Like most of South Asia, Islam in Nepal too is a very liberal and

progressive religion. The socio cultural identity of Muslims in Nepal has remained largely diffused and though the episode of Kalo Budhwar did ruffle it marginally, it remains essentially calm and secure. The Author successfully locates the Muslim discourses against the backdrop of a highly uncertain political climate. The policies of inclusion adopted by majority of the political parties, partly due to the electoral compulsions but largely as a matter of routine, go to show the promise that is held for Muslim representation in the political unfolding.

In sum, a careful reading of the book reveals that the author has remained fairly cautious in concluding that there is an all out effort to carve out a distinct identity of Islam in Nepal. There are serious attempts within the community to provide inspiration to members to establish their religiosity. Translation of the Quran in Nepali, publication of journals like Madhur Sandesh (Journal of the Islami Sangh), circulation of attempts to make this possible. However this is not a unique situation where any community attempts to reinvigorate itself by bringing about an awareness of its diverse religious practices and traditions. To translate this trend into a statement of 'Islamic Revival' as the title of the book suggests, is farfetched to the present reviewer. On the whole the work is valuable in as much as it acquaints the reader with a phenomenon that is both recent and fascinating.

