

# Anthropology Book Forum

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GUPTA, RADHIKA. *Freedom in Captivity: Negotiations of Belonging along Kashmir's Frontier*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. 232pp ISBN:9781009201629

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A vignette from the 2004 Bollywood film *Lakshya* depicts a young army major's discovery of lifelong commitment on the distant hill of Kargil, the site of the fourth Indo-Pak war. *Lakshya* is not an exception in this genre. Many later films followed the same trope: conflicted personal lives, the Kargil war, and the transformation of the protagonists into guardians of sovereignty at the cost of some personal sacrifice. The hitherto unknown town of Kargil in the Himalayas, practically cut off from the rest of the world for six months, captivated the imagination of the 'nation.' Radhika Gupta's *Freedom in Captivity: Negotiations of Belonging along Kashmir's Frontier* is not about these stories of war and valour. Instead, it begins by exploring a simple yet pertinent question: What does life look like on the margins that have transfixed the Indian national imagination?

Based on ethnographic research for over 14 years (2008-21), Gupta explores what freedom means to borderland *Kargilis*, who do not equate it with a quest for national sovereignty. She shifts "the gaze away from top-down security concerns to examine how borderland dwellers negotiate regimes of state security and their geopolitical location in everyday life" (8). The book thus goes beyond the infrastructural perspective of bricks and barracks to discover negotiations of belonging. Gupta invites us to reimagine borderlands beyond their physical territorial demarcations. In doing so, she reconstructs the border as a space of fiction where the politics of belonging is negotiated. This nuanced reading of belonging, she argues, "belie analysis framed by the dichotomies of legal-illegal, insurgent-subjugated, mobility and stasis that pervade borderland studies" (9).

The book is divided into five chapters, excluding an introduction and an epilogue. It begins with what Gupta calls “genealogies of political consciousness”—an attempt to rescue “place from the territory” (32). The narration of the history of *place*, she argues, is foregrounded “on people’s memories and legends in contrast to nationalist narratives in which Kargil is predominantly a strategic border” (34). This is important given the contested history of the region. Most academic research on the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir has focused on the insurgency which began in the late 1980s and the subsequent invasive presence of the military. *Freedom in Captivity* broadens the scope of literature by foregrounding the “emergent consciousness of regional Kargili identity in relation to Baltistan, Buddhist Ladakh and the Kashmir Valley” (34). Contextualising Kargili Shias beyond the Kashmir conflict and within the larger trans-Himalayan ecumene adds a much-needed layer to conflict studies and trans-Himalayan literature. From a historical perspective, it brings forth the muzzled political voices from Gilgit, Baltistan and Kargil in academic literature and post-colonial nationalistic imagination. Although Gupta acknowledges that it is impossible to state today how “Kargilis might have envisioned their future in 1947 as memories of past have been filtered through their present desire to belong to India” (41).

Contrary to this, the post-partition politics of Kargil reflect legible patterns discussed throughout the chapters. The first two chapters reflect on the emergence of the nascent regional consciousness of Kargil being a poor cousin of Leh and the communalisation of politics in the backdrop of the Kashmir conflict. This is accomplished by netting everyday encounters of sectarian prejudices, stereotypes and demographic anxieties within communities. A highlight is the narration of intra-sectarian polemic through the micropolitics of *Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust* (IKMT) and the *Islamia School*, two rival factions within Kargili Shia. It both sums up and reflects a microcosm of the influence of Iran on political subjectivity in Kargil and the larger transnational Islamic exchange.

The second half of the book arises from the question Gupta frequently encountered during her fieldwork: “But what is your topic?” and her response: a study of the culture and history of the region. Woven through cultural activism and artistic heritage, chapter four explores intra-regional cultural exchange between Leh and Kargil. Gupta employs an “interpretive strategy of translation as a search for equivalence between a past essentialised as Buddhist and the Islamic present in Kargil” (130). The book envisions the *Kargili* identity independently from Buddhist Ladakh and Sunni Kashmir yet irrevocably connected to both. A reference to cultural

politics, the author contends, is important as it reflects another dimension of the paradox of freedom in captivity that Kargil's Muslims inhabit.

The last chapter looks through the prism of cultural exchange on both sides of the India and Pakistan border. Through this, she brings out the narratives of 'cross border settlers': people who were already living on one side before the partition of the Indian subcontinent and decided not to go back. For the author, their "predicaments of belonging are distinct from partition refugees who voluntarily migrated to the other side" (161). Another noteworthy inclusion is the history of villages that experienced multiple partitions (1947, 1965, and 1971), often ignored in partition historiography. Through these overlooked narratives, Gupta examines "encapsulation within India as a process and the dialectic of connection-disconnection highlighted for those living on the edge" (162). This examination reveals the homogenised nationalistic representation and the neo-coloniality across both sides of the border.

The book ends with an epilogue reflecting on the living memory of the Kargil War within the 'national' imagination. Another important reference is the 2019 constitutional amendment that revoked Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous (Article 370) status, dividing the state into two Union Territories (UTs). The amendment spearheaded by the Hindu right-wing Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) dramatically altered the polity of the region. The downgrading of a state to a Union Territory (UT), a first in postcolonial India, was widely unpopular in Kashmir and Kargil, a point of rare convergence. To curb the dissent, all political leaders were put behind bars, and the entire region was under an internet siege for eighteen months.

The abrogation of Article 370 and the incremental rightward shift of national politics over the last decade and a half has ushered a politics of anxiety and fear within India's minorities, particularly Muslims. This is equally true for Kargil Shias, a "double minority, engulfed in this sense of despair" (195). The growing insecurity and changing political subjectivities seem to be critical in the region's politics. The seven-page epilogue lacks the rich description that the reader has become accustomed to in the preceding pages. The brief engagement with post-370 politics leaves readers longing for more. Another area that could have enriched the analysis further is a deeper exploration of the Sunni minority within Kargil. The micropolitics of the Sunni minority within the Shia majority district could have added another layer of nuance to the already exceptional ethnographic work. This perspective becomes particularly relevant

given that Drass, a town with a significant Sunni population, was the actual site of the Kargil war.

Nonetheless, the book brilliantly accomplishes the task it undertakes. It brings forth the little-discussed peripheral identity from a humanist perspective. It cautions against subsuming *Kargili* identity into either Buddhist Ladakh or Sunni Kashmiri. Lastly, the work adds breadth to the partition historiography with references to villages like Badgam, which has shuffled between India and Pakistan twice. These contributions make *Freedom in Captivity* a valuable addition to the Kashmir studies literature and the larger anthropological understanding of the trans-Himalayan region.

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