

BOOK REVIEW

“Here in Nepal There are No Old Deaf People”: Describing Deafness in a Nepali Context

Review of: Hoffmann-Dilloway, E. (2016). *Signing and belonging in Nepal*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press. Hardback or e-book. 135 pages. \$60.00.

Review for Social Media

Signing and belonging in Nepal presents an insightful examination of what deafness means in the cultural, linguistic, political, religious, geographic, and social contexts of Nepal. This book is extremely engaging and readable and presents many interesting accounts of what deafness means in Nepal. It would be a great choice for anyone who is interested in learning about different cultures and languages.

Review

Signing and belonging in Nepal is written by linguistic anthropologist Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway. This book is an insightful presentation of Hoffmann-Dilloway's observations and experiences with the Deaf community of Nepal over many visits between 1997 and 2015. It presents a deep and thoughtful description of her immersion into the Nepali ways of life, the ways in which Nepal has changed over the years, and her experiences interacting with Deaf Nepalis. Hoffmann generously shares her personal experiences of signing, culture, and deafness in Nepal. She illustrates her points with descriptions of her experiences, such as observing Nepali Sign Language (NSL) classes and standardization meetings, overhearing comments made by hearing Nepali people about her deaf friends, and interviews with deaf adults who never acquired sign language. These insights and experiences are presented in a reader-friendly style with dialog transcripts, photos, and illustrations used to clearly demonstrate important points.

The first chapter provides information that contextualizes all the content that follows. It presents the theoretical and methodological lenses used in the book and introduces the author as she was when she first visited Nepal: a 20-year-old undergraduate student completing a semester abroad. Chapter 2 outlines the historical and cultural context of Nepal, including a description of castes, or *jāts*, nationalism, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, religion, and beliefs. This overview provides a fascinating insight into the rich cultural beliefs and practices of the Nepali people and the ways that these beliefs and practices interact with the concept of deafness. Chapters 3 through 5 examine different aspects of what it means to be deaf in Nepal.

The emergence and development of NSL and the efforts made by the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf to standardize, document, and disseminate their language are described. Next, Hoffmann-Dilloway considers more deeply the lives of deaf people who have limited language skills and the impact this has on their social and home lives. This is the case for many adult Nepali people who are deaf as there was no school for the deaf and no recognition of a sign language until 1966. Nepali society can be extremely isolating for individuals with disabilities due to the country's disperse population, mountainous terrain, religious and ethnic diversity, political instability, and high rates of poverty. For these reasons, Hoffmann-Dilloway notes that older deaf people frequently do not identify as being deaf, do not use sign language, and do not interact with other deaf people. Finally, recent developments that have enhanced the standing of deaf people within Nepali society are described. This includes deliberate campaigning by individuals and organizations, such as the Kathmandu Association for the Deaf, but also the acts of commercial entities such as the Bakery Café. This restaurant chain employed deaf wait staff and ran a media campaign featuring deaf signers to overcome cultural beliefs that if hearing people accepted food from people who were deaf they would experience a type of ritual pollution as a result (e.g., the transference of bad karma through interaction).

Signing and Belonging in Nepal is an examination of the meaning of deafness in the Nepali cultural, linguistic, political, religious, geographic, and social context. Although it is specific to Nepal, there is a broader applicability of the book in terms of understanding Deaf communities that have developed in relative isolation, and in encouraging a view of deafness that is beyond common linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical models. In addition to those interested in Deaf cultures and related issues, I recommend this book for anyone who is interested in learning about different cultures and languages.

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