

Book Review

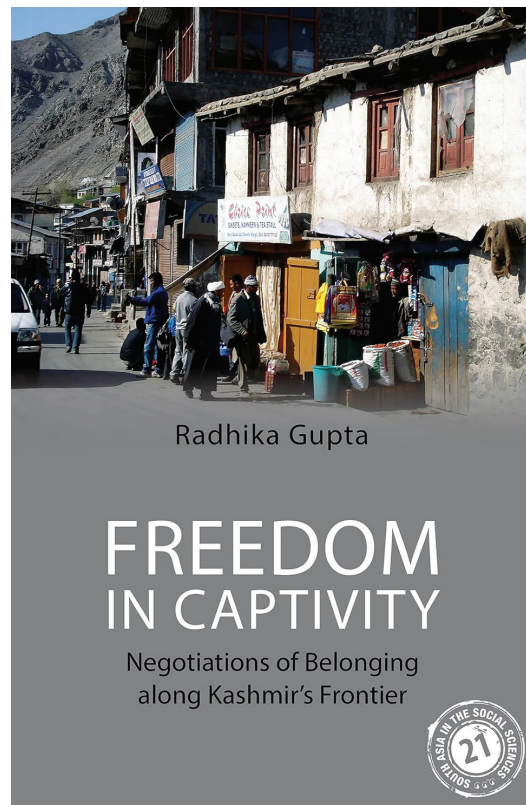
Review of *Freedom in Captivity: Negotiations of Belonging along Kashmir's Frontier* by Radhika Gupta

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While a wide range of scholarship has examined Ladakh's position within the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, this work has overwhelmingly focused on Leh and its Buddhist majority, leaving the religious, cultural, and political lives of Kargil's Twelver Shi'i Muslim community comparatively underexamined. Foundational studies by Aggarwal on borderland sovereignty (2004), Mills on Buddhist monastic identity (2003), and van Beek and Pirie's edited volume on continuity and change in Ladakh (2008), alongside Fewkes's work on trans-Himalayan trade (2009) and Dinnerstein's recent research on Ladakhi folksong traditions (2025), have significantly shaped scholarship on the region, yet remain largely centered on Leh and its Buddhist institutions. With the notable exception of Mona Bhan's *Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?* (2013), there are few sustained ethnographic studies of Kargil, and much of the existing literature draws on fieldwork conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s. In *Freedom in Captivity*, anthropologist Radhika Gupta addresses this scholarly gap through extensive ethnographic and historical research, offering the most nuanced study of religious and political life in Kargil to date. Gupta demonstrates how Kargilis navigate life in a militarized and politically sensitive borderland by mobilizing what she terms a "cartography of ideas"—a shifting repertoire of religious, regional, national, and "imaginative horizons" through which belonging and representation are negotiated within the Indian nation-state (pp. 7–10). Through richly grounded accounts of everyday life, religious practice, and political discourse, she shows that Kargil is not simply a marginal appendage of Kashmir or Ladakh, but a captive borderland in which residents "sustain senses of place and modes of selfhood that are anchored within wider horizons that transcend its political boundaries" (p. 7). The introduction lays out the book's theoretical stakes through the concept of "captivity," which Gupta frames in both material and discursive terms. While the former—militarization, surveillance, and restricted mobility—is

analytically compelling, the latter raises a question: does discursive marginalization, however consequential, rise to the level of captivity in the same way as territorial enclosure? Gupta positions her intervention as a response to infrastructure-focused borderland scholarship, showing how Kargilis exercise agency through "cartographies of ideas" that do not rely on overt resistance or cross-border transgression (p. 9). These overlapping registers—including Shi'i internationalism, trans-Himalayan ties, and national citizenship—enable what she calls "creative calibration across scales" (p. 26). However, the theoretical vocabulary introduced in the opening chapter, particularly the "cartography of ideas," is not consistently revisited in the chapters that follow. Likewise, the brief discussion of multi-sited research in Iran and Mumbai is not fully integrated into the book's central analytical arc. These are minor limitations in a work that otherwise offers a vivid and compelling account of place-making and political belonging in Kargil.

Chapter one, "Genealogies of Political Consciousness," traces the development of Kargili political agency from the Dogra period through Partition and postcolonial governance. Gupta shows how Kargili Muslims have long been "entangled in a web of simultaneous allegiance and alienation from both the Kashmir Valley and Buddhist Ladakh (Leh)" (p. 47). While the chapter at times works within a familiar binary in Ladakh studies—Buddhist Leh versus Muslim Kargil—it ultimately complicates this divide through sustained attention to regional, sectarian, and religious differences within Kargil itself. Further research on minority religious communities within Kargil could build productively on this historical foundation.

Chapters two and three examine the role of Twelver Shi'ism in shaping reform movements and sectarian politics. Gupta's discussion of gender-based reform and "women's selfhood" distinguishes her approach from Saba Mahmood's (2005) study of women's piety movements in Egypt. Rather than emphasizing the habituation

of normative practices, Gupta foregrounds the biographical and personal dimensions of religious experience, arguing that “the biography of individual women becomes ethnographically important” (p. 77). She situates Kargili Shi’i reform within broader debates shaped by Iranian nationalism and the contested legacy of the Iranian Revolution. Chapter three, centered on the 2008 local elections, offers rare insight into sectarian differentiation within Shi’ism, particularly between the Islamia School (aligned with Ayatollah Sistani) and the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT), which follows Iranian clerical authority. Based on my own fieldwork in Leh, I found Gupta’s analysis of *vilayat-i faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) especially resonant, as it captures how belonging is actively negotiated through competing religious institutions and political imaginaries that build off of broader trans-Shi’i theological ideals of protest and activism.

The fourth chapter turns to cultural activism and heritage projects, situating Kargil within what Gupta terms a broader trans-Himalayan ecumene. Scholars of Ladakh and the Himalayas will find much of this material compelling, particularly the discussions of religious festivals, landscape veneration, and local healing practices. At the same time, these themes are often treated in broad strokes, and several case studies would benefit from deeper engagement with existing scholarship and more sustained ethnographic analysis. One particularly compelling case—the Lhamo of Trespone, a spiritual healer believed to channel Fatima Zahra—invites comparison with Buddhist spirit-medium traditions elsewhere in Ladakh, yet receives only a few pages of attention. Such moments would support more extended analysis, though the chapter nonetheless opens promising avenues for future comparative work on ritual authority and shared religious landscapes.

The final chapter and epilogue foreground Baltistan as a persistently occluded reference point in Kargili imaginaries of belonging. Gupta briefly notes how WhatsApp and

other digital media enable new forms of connection and political expression, a theme that could be developed further—especially given the growing importance of digital publics in shaping youth activism and religious discourse. The epilogue raises urgent questions about Kargil’s future following the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status and its deeper incorporation into the Indian central state.

Freedom in Captivity stands as the definitive entry point for scholars seeking to understand Kargil and the broader dynamics of belonging, inclusion, and political life along Kashmir’s frontiers. Gupta’s study offers the most sustained and analytically rigorous account of the region to date. The book not only provides critical insight into how belonging is negotiated under conditions of militarization and political uncertainty, but also productively plants the seeds for future research in the region and comparative analysis. Written in an engaging and accessible style, it would be well suited for assignment in undergraduate courses, particularly in classes on Islam in South Asia, borderland studies, and the anthropology of religion.

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Rohit Singh is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Denison University and an ethnographer of Himalayan religions, specializing in Buddhism and Islam in the Indo-Himalayan region. Singh's research spans three intersecting areas: inter-religious encounter, religion and secularity, and the ethnography of Tantra. His scholarship has appeared in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, *HIMALAYA: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, and the *Oxford Handbooks Online: Religion*. He is co-editor of *The Ethnography of Tantra: Textures and Contexts of Living Tantric Traditions*, produced with Carola E. Lorea. He is currently completing a book manuscript on religion and secularity in Ladakh, tracing how Buddhist and Muslim communities articulate shared moral worlds in a rapidly transforming Himalayan borderland.