

# THE PERIPHERAL PROTAGONIST: THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE MISSING TRANS-HIMALAYAN TRADER

MARCH, 2017

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## ABSTRACT

*It is intriguing that despite a liberal economic narrative of borders as bridges, the trans-Himalayan trader has remained a rather forlorn and forgotten metaphor. This absence has however neither been voluntary nor anticipated but instead can be traced to fundamental flaws in India's subregional discourse with its bias toward state-led formal institution building. Far from being marginal, the trans-Himalayan trader was in fact the central protagonist, as can be seen from a reading of the social and economic history of India's borderlands. While this is not an attempt to read back into history a larger-than-life role for the border actor, it is a cue for India's subregional discourse to imaginatively re-engage with the expertise and rich form of social capital that the transborder trader represents.*

## THE ABSENT TRADER

It is intriguing that despite a liberal economic narrative on borders, the trans-Himalayan trader has curiously remained marginal to India's subregional economic narrative. This absence has however neither been voluntary nor anticipated but instead can be traced to fundamental flaws in India's mainstream subregional discourse with its bias toward state-led formal institution building. India's subregional discourse appears poised uncertainly between an entrenched geopolitical account of endemic competition and a feel-good geoeconomic narrative of borders as bridges. Consequently, the subregional moment in Indian IR has been a rather bittersweet one, caught between these colliding dualisms. (Kurian 2015) This dualism can also help us understand the transitions that the transborder trader has undergone; from being the central protagonist historically to today becoming a rather forlorn metaphor for a conflicted and confused discourse. Not surprisingly, then the rich form of social capital that the transborder trader represents has remained an underutilised resource in India's subregional engagement.

These have resulted in a range of contradictions and dichotomies that is played out at the borderlands. It remains a fact that transborder economic exchanges tend to be afflicted by a range of dichotomies; with border trade registering only modest increases.<sup>1</sup> Lack of efficiency of border corridors has been another factor hindering competitiveness and trade expansion. The trade office at Gunji, a border village in Uttarakhand lacks even the most basic amenities such as drinking water, accommodation and warehouses. The lack of a currency exchange facility at Gunji has meant that Indian traders end up paying more to buy yuan at the Chinese market centre in Taklakot. (Chakrabarty 2015) An erstwhile trader, Pradyuman Garbiyal whose family had a shop in two Tibetan markets, Tukhar and Taklakot Mandis (market) till 1962, no longer trades with Tibet largely due to steep transportation costs. Multiple handling and paper work have led to higher transaction costs, compounded by moves towards centralisation. For instance, trade permits are no longer issued in Dharchula but are instead sent to Dehradun, the state capital, entailing a delay of several weeks. (Personal interview, 29 August 2015)

## SOCIALISING THE SUBREGIONAL

Far from being marginal, the trans-Himalayan trader was in fact the central protagonist, as a reading of the social and economic history of the borderlands reveals. Interestingly, the transborder trader was not always the quintessential big merchant; rather it was often the petty trader who played a big role in border economies and in the subregion. It was as Janet Rizvi notes 'an economy made self-sufficient' due to the 'enormous input of time and effort' by these peasant-traders. (Rizvi 1999:14-15) An illustrative example of this is the crucial linking role that Ladakh's 'peasant-traders' played in creating webs of interdependence within the region. These peasant-traders bartered grain from their fields to the Chang-pa nomads of southeast Ladakh and western Tibet to exchange for pashm, wool and salt.<sup>2</sup> The trader performed important intermediary roles as well. For instance, the Lhasa Newars,

influential expatriate traders from Kathmandu with historic trade links with Tibet, forged important links with South and Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> Trans-Himalayan long distance trade was typically characterised by highly personalised trust-based informal networks. Trade ties were underwritten by trust-based agreements such as the *gamgya* and *netsang*, the equivalent of the modern day business contract. Such personalised trust-based contracts, which included preferential terms of barter, food and shelter, were so durable that they often lasted for several generations, often bequeathed to the next of kin. Clearly, a fixation with the idea of subregionalism as a state project has meant that the role of transnational ethnic social networks in a border region is often not recognised as a form of social capital. (Chen 2000) Transnational social networks based on ancestral and kinship ties and interpersonal trust networks constitute a form of social capital that is integral to a transborder subregion, resting on a highly place-centric sense of self and community identity. (Tilly 2007, Chen 2000)

This is not an attempt to read back into history a larger-than-life role for the border actor. But it is a cue to not forget that the trans-Himalayan trader contributed in no small measure to the success of dynamic processes of subregional integration from below. India's subregional diplomacy is clearly producing a modest but valuable space for subnational actors to become active partners in framing the terms of India's subregional engagement. If engaged well, India's subregional discourse can creatively draw upon the rich form of social capital that the transborder trader represents. Shining a light on the agency that border sites and actors wielded in shaping the course of inter-Asian interactions, can also help fill a critical gap in India's subregional imaginary. It can also be a serendipitous moment to understand how quotidian processes can contribute to a bottom-up vision of India's subregional narrative by problematising the Westphalian idea in imaginative ways.

## NOTES

1. India and China opened their first border trade route in 1991 between Dharachula in Uttaranchal and Pulan in Tibet through the Lipulekh Pass. A second border trade post was opened in 1993 between Namgyal in Himachal Pradesh and Juiba in Tibet. Garbyang in Uttaranchal and Shipki La in Himachal are the two Land Customs Stations along the India-China border.
2. Ladakh was till 1947 a major hub of a trade network that included Skardu, Srinagar, Hoshiarpur, Kulu and radiated outward to Lhasa and Yarkand. Leh and Kargil traders would travel to the September market at Gartok in western Tibet to sell coral and gold from Yarkand for the Lhasa nobility. (Rizvi 1985:14)
3. The control that valley merchants wielded over the two-way caravan trade with Tibet was also a lucrative source of tax revenue for the Newar kings. (Lewis 2011)

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