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Himalayan Histories

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The Himalayas have been a zone of global interactions and exchanges over the centuries, quite unlike the stereotype of remoteness and isolation.

The Gateway to Hell, it transpires, sits on the very roof of the world. In 2007, I travelled along the Friendship Highway, which links Lhasa to Kathmandu. Nyalam — termed 'Gateway to Hell' by travellers — is the starting point for an ancient trans-Himalayan trading route following the Bhote Kosi river from Tibet into Nepal. It is also the beginning of one of the world's most stunning zones of environmental and cultural transition. In less than 40 kilometres, the Friendship Highway catapults 2,000 metres off the Tibetan plateau. Blue skies and arid highlands give way to perpetual rain and cloud forests. The Sinic world melds into something more subcontinental. At Kodari, the border post, I had one final interaction with the Chinese state, scowling yet efficient, and then encountered the chaos of a Nepali customs office. Outside, a truckers' union had declared a bandh and had blocked the highway to Kathmandu. Welcome to South Asia.

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Historically, as toponyms like Gateway to Hell testify, such zones of transition were uncomfortable and dangerous places. Yet they are at the very heart of the story of the Himalayan region. Ed Douglas's new book, *Himalaya: A Human History*, demonstrates how cultures along the roof of the world have been defined by perpetual border crossing. Douglas's account forcefully pushes against the common narrative that the Himalaya are a barrier — a perpetual abode of snow and ice shielding disparate civilisations from one another. Rather, trade routes like the Gateway to Hell have created a region characterised by the remarkable interaction of different people and ideas. Despite their hazards (while on the Friendship Highway in 2007, I lost count of the number of times our jeep nearly careened off the muddy path and into the Bhote Kosi gorge), these mountain passes created global crossroads that both absorbed new influences and preserved old cultural and religious ideas.

The scale of the Himalaya, Douglas writes, is quite simply “steroidal.” And, clocking in at nearly 600 pages, this book is as expansive as its subject matter. Throughout its pages are sprinkled individuals' first encounters with these peaks, episodes which will resonate with any modern-day traveller. The East India Company officer George Bogle thus recollected his first impressions when confronted with the Bhutanese foothills in 1774: “It is impossible to conceive any change of country more abrupt or any contrast more striking.” This contrast is only getting starker with time. An extensive chapter on the geology of the Himalaya discusses just how rapidly they are growing. Nanga Parbat knifes an extra 11 or 13 millimetres into the sky with every passing year.

Local lives and global connections

Except for this chapter on geology, it is the people of the Himalaya, rather than the mountains, which dominate the narrative. Popular writing on the Himalaya, Douglas correctly notes, focuses obsessively on a handful of subjects, such as western mountaineers and their feats. “Why,” he asks, “was it that stories about climbing Everest were far more common than stories about the people who lived in its shadow?” One of the great strengths of the book is how it looks beyond the handful of Europeans whose names have been etched into Himalayan history — the imperial adventurer Francis Younghusband, the botanist Joseph Hooker, or the mountaineers George Mallory and Edmund Hillary, for example — and unearths indigenous Himalayan lives which are relatively unknown yet far more consequential.

These individuals, Douglas asserts, had no interest in establishing forbidden cities or hermit kingdoms. Instead, they forged globe-spanning cultural and economic networks through those treacherous mountain passages. Consider the humble yak tail as an international commodity. Tibet exported this item to both ends of the known world: ancient Romans used them as flywhisks, while in Beijing they were adopted as beards in Chinese opera. Musk from the Himalaya was particularly prized in the bazaars of early Islamic metropolises like Mecca and Basra.

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But it was religion that best demonstrated the openness and connectivity atop the roof of the world. Tibet's relatively recent adoption of Buddhism serves as a case in point. Buddhism, Douglas writes, appealed to Tibetan elites since it “was truly international.” It promised cultural and economic ties with Central, South, and East Asia, connecting the arid plateau with Asia's most cosmopolitan centres. And even as Buddhism became inseparable from Tibet's identity, Tibetans retained a curiosity about, and tolerance for, other faiths. In the early 700s, they requested an Islamic scholar from Mecca; in return, they sent a golden statue of the Buddha to the holy city. In the 1600s, the king of Guge, in western Tibet, actually encouraged a Jesuit missionary from Agra to establish a church and challenge Buddhist teachings. Needless to say, when it came to Himalayan interactions with Christian missionaries, such openness and tolerance usually flowed in one direction only.

Trade and religion facilitated some dazzling trans-Himalayan sojourns. In the thirteenth century, a Tibetan religious authority recruited Arniko, a gifted artisan from the Kathmandu Valley, to help construct a stupa near Shigatse. His work was so impressive that the emperor Kublai Khan summoned him to Beijing, where he became the chief artisan for the Yuan Dynasty. (Today, the Nepali portion of the Friendship Highway is named after Arniko.) Lhasa's commercial, religious, and political importance turned it into a polyglot city: it hosted permanent communities of Armenian traders, Jesuit priests, Kashmiri Muslims, Newars, Mongols, and Chinese, all living relatively peaceably in the shadow of the Potala Palace. Through such descriptions and life stories, Douglas does a masterful job of showing how change and heterogeneity characterised Himalayan civilisations.

Western encounters

Europeans — first bearing Bibles, later carrying diplomatic communiques and military orders — utterly transformed how the Himalaya interacted with the wider world. Douglas emphasises that, while Himalayan kingdoms rebuffed the political overtures of the East India Company, they welcomed the new knowledge, ideas, and inventions that Europeans brought. When George Bogle met the sixth Panchen Lama in 1774 at Tashilhunpo Monastery, for example, he found the spiritual leader in possession of a camera obscura containing scenes of London.

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In a particularly fascinating chapter, Douglas narrates how Europeans facilitated a botanical exchange with long-lasting effects on the Himalaya and the wider world. By introducing the potato, a staple today in any Himalayan cuisine, they set off a regional population boom: the root vegetable was relatively easy to cultivate and a vital source of calories. Rhododendrons became the rage in European gardening after Joseph Hooker brought samples from Sikkim to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew in Britain. A more globally consequential commodity was, of course, the tea plant: as profits from the opium trade to China declined, East India Company officials shrewdly placed their bets on tea cultivation. Within a single generation, tea transformed regions like Darjeeling beyond recognition. In the 1830s, Darjeeling district was a thickly forested mountainscape of perhaps 100 people, ruled by the chogyal of Sikkim. Around three decades later, tea plantations had replaced the forests, drawing in nearly 100,000 migrant workers, mostly from Nepal. The Raj had long before coerced the chogyal into ceding this portion of his kingdom.

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European expeditions into the mountains were consistently thwarted by Himalayan rulers and officials who looked upon the East India Company's expansion with alarm. Perhaps for that reason, many Europeans were disdainful of how easily Himalayan people could reshape their identities to cross borders. In the Johar Valley, the head of a trading route some 600 kilometres west of the Gateway to Hell, a colonial officer noted that locals identified as Hindus but “while in Tibet they seem glad enough to shake off their Hinduism and become Buddhists, or anything you like.”

A later generation of European visitors, however, used the Himalaya as a template to recast their own identities and beliefs, sometimes in quite nefarious ways. For Helena Blavatsky, the grand dame of Theosophy, the Himalaya were an untapped reservoir of timeless, occult wisdom— regardless of whether such wisdom was the product of her own hyperactive imagination. Douglas excoriates the

stereotypes of the Himalaya which Theosophy helped unleash, “as though we were still to assess modern Africa through the prism of the Tarzan legend.” In the 1920s, mountaineers launched their often-deadly ascents in “an attempt to recapture the self-assurance of the Edwardian era.” And the Nazis had a field day in the region, measuring skull sizes (to buttress Nazi theories on Germans’ Aryan origins) and freezing to death on Nanga Parbat, all in the name of the Führer.

Borders and ruins

Douglas is deeply critical of how the post-colonial order has shaped the Himalaya. Hardened national borders have slammed a steel gate through many mountain passes, suffocating local economies, snapping cultural ties, and depopulating once-thriving settlements. In Milam, the last village in the Johar Valley before the Indo-Tibetan border, Douglas finds that a once-prosperous trading centre is now “a place of ruins” (if you view [satellite imagery](#) of Milam available from Google Maps, you will see a tell-tale sign of this ruin: the roofs of most buildings have collapsed). The political and military interests of Delhi, Beijing, and Kathmandu now hold ultimate sway—often at dramatic odds with the interests of those living along the borders.

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Jingo-fuelled nationalism, meanwhile, has unleashed all types of absurdities. As an example, Douglas cites squabbles between Nepal and China over the ownership of Everest, which resulted in demonstrations in Kathmandu in the 1960s: “A mountain no one in the capital had heard of a century earlier was now a piece on Asia’s strategic chessboard.” The Himalaya have always been a politically contested region—a place wracked by bouts of intense violence (in Douglas’s book it is difficult to keep track of the number of bloody massacres involving the Nepali monarchy). The strategic imperatives of distant capital cities, however, have replaced an atmosphere of openness and exchange with deep suspicion and mutual hostility.

Take the Friendship Highway as an example. In the 1960s, Douglas tells us, King Mahendra of Nepal chose its current route through the Gateway to Hell rather than through a more hospitable neighbouring pass. He hoped that the road would take longer to build—perhaps it could never be constructed, forever washing away into the Bhote Kosi river. The Chinese completed the road. During construction, a Chinese engineer fled to Taiwan, claiming that bridges along the Friendship Highway in Nepal were being designed so they could bear the weight of Chinese tanks.

There is so much detail in Douglas’s book that, at times, it becomes a little overwhelming. Oftentimes, the profiles of historical figures get bogged down in superfluous detail and trivia, material which would have been better omitted or relegated to endnotes (Douglas has deliberately avoided endnotes in the book, a decision I wish he had reconsidered). Instead of introducing so many characters, it would have been wiser to focus on a few and more completely flesh out their life stories. For example, I would have loved to know more about Eliza James, an Irishwoman who lived in colonial Shimla and, later in life, recast herself as Lola Montez, a Spanish dancer whose paramours included the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt and Jang Bahadur Rana, the powerful prime minister of Nepal.

Himalaya is primarily the story of Tibet and Nepal, with Indian regions like Kumaon, Garhwal, Sikkim, and Darjeeling receiving somewhat secondary attention. A more glaring absence is Kashmir. Kashmir appears at the margins of the narrative — first, as a stronghold of Buddhism, later in relation to Ladakh — but the region should be central to any authoritative account of the Himalaya. A Kashmiri dimension could have markedly strengthened Douglas’s book, detailing how Islam spread through the mountain passes and left lasting cultural and political influences.

When the glaciers retreat

For a book which emphasises the interconnectivity of the Himalayan region, it is surprising that Douglas gives little attention to contemporary environmental concerns, which ignores cultural, linguistic, and religious divides. Rapid environmental destruction is the hallmark of modern Himalayan history.

There are certainly hints in the book of how much has changed in recent centuries. Douglas writes that, in 1785, the Indologist William Jones could see Jomolhari, a 7,000-metre peak which straddles the contemporary border between Bhutan and Tibet, from Bhagalpur, some 367 kilometres away on the Ganges in Bihar. This is simply unthinkable today, when brown haze obscures Kanchenjunga from Darjeeling and Sikkim. The peaks and troughs of modern environmentalism certainly deserve some space in this account: the Chipko movement and wildlife conservation efforts, for example, alongside China and India’s destructive spates of dam building or follies like

the Char Dham Highway.

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This is an important time to read about the Himalaya. Even as glaciers retreat, glacial dams burst, and forest fires rage in Nepal and Uttarakhand, sabre-rattling by Delhi and Beijing along the Line of Control has upped the temperature in a markedly different and ominous way. It can sometimes be difficult to remember that 50 million lives hang in the balance of these developments— not to mention the billions downstream who rely on water from the Himalaya. Policymakers on both sides of the Himalaya would be wise to read Douglas’s book and reflect on its longer history of interconnectivity, if only to make sure that they do not create a real Gateway to Hell along the roof of the world.