Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed: Return to Tarang, by James F Fisher

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This book is a sort of sequel to Fisher’s classic *Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, & Culture in Northwest Nepal* (1986). As the title suggests, that particular study centred on the transaction circuits that determined the lives of people living in Tarang, a village in the remote district of Dolpa. After an absence of 44 years, Fisher returned to Tarang in 2011, to trace back over the changes that have taken place since he carried out doctoral fieldwork there in the late 1960s. Written in a humble and self-deprecating tone, *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed* begins with a critical review of the author’s conclusive thoughts in 1986. Essentially, the major criticism Fisher levels against his earlier professional self is that of having paid more attention to the transaction systems in which Taralis were involved than to their actual lives. While this was common practice in the 1960s, Fisher rightly notes, ‘One size rarely, if ever, fits all’ (p. 169). Yet, foregrounding people’s lifeworlds does not mean neglecting the broader macrosystems within which they are intertwined. The author’s aim is indeed to illustrate how new opportunities offered by the changes that have taken place in Nepal over the last 50 years or so have directly or indirectly affected new generations of Tarali people. Nowadays, the ancient transaction systems described by Fisher in his 1986 book intermingle with present-day global dynamics, with repercussions that would have been unimaginable until just a few decades ago.

The seven initial chapters each illustrate a different aspect of these changes – which are more systematically listed in the conclusions (p.169-70) – in and through the lives of distinct people. Entwining biographical and contextual elements, Chapter 2 describes the carpet trade that was successfully established in Kathmandu by a man named Lank Man. Taking advantage of new opportunities that had previously
been unthinkable, the business was later developed by Lank Man’s
nenephew Bhim, and his wife Sukar, who managed to expand it to Europe.
Bhim and Sukar thus represent the ‘globalized’ next generation of
Tarali traders, which is the focus of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 deals with
the Tarali community in Kathmandu, and their relationship with other
ethnic groups in the variegated sociocultural context of Nepal’s capital
city. Chapter 5 illustrates how the flourishing business of selling
Yarsagumba (a parasitical fungus highly valued on the Chinese market),
unknown in the 1960s, is considerably altering people’s lifestyle in the
remote communities of Dolpa where the fungus grows, allowing them
to buy cell phones and DVD players, but also inducing the perilous,
gradual abandonment of agriculture. Then, Chapters 6 to 8 mark
Fisher’s actual return to Tarang, offering a collection of observations
and comparisons with his previous experience in the area, written in
a fluid diary style.

Chapter 9, which makes up the second half of the book, grounds
the point made in the introduction in the story of a single person,
Chandra Man, the first Tarali to reside in Kathmandu. In effect, this
case shows that one should be wary of essentialising people, insofar
as unpredictable twists may take anyone’s life into unforeseeable
directions that discourage conceiving of someone’s existence as the
mere by-product of a specific context. Underscoring the dynamic
interplay between ‘system’ and ‘agency’ at play in Chandra Man’s life
history allows Fisher to unsettle the rather straightforward correlation
between ‘people’ and ‘their culture’ that has come to characterise most
of anthropology. Hence the author describes his line of reasoning as
somehow ‘anti-anthropological’ (p. 101), since the outspoken aim is to
problematic this one-dimensional habit of thought by showing that
people’s lives are not necessarily dominated by the cultural structures
within which they have been socialised.

However, as the author plainly points out, it is one thing to address
‘life as experienced’ and quite another to convert this experiential
‘raw material’ into a cohesive narrative. The author does an excellent
job in bringing Lank Man, Bisara, Bhim, Sukar, and Dhanu to the
fore, using their life stories as a narrative device to illustrate broader
social dynamics. Still, Fisher’s approach might have benefitted from
further exploration into these people’s personal experiences of the
broader context in which they live, and into the meaning and value each of them comes to attach to it. This would have helped to ground the discussion even more in the lives of the protagonists, enriching their biographies by highlighting aspects such as their dreams, worries or expectations for the future. On the contrary, Chandra Man’s long monologue about his infancy could have been significantly edited, as it is punctuated by many digressions that distract rather than add to the narrative, whereas his adult life – the time when the real changes that made Chandra Man different from many Taralis took place – is rushed through in the last few pages. Structurally, the overabundance of monologic speech in the second half of the book could have been more evenly balanced against the lack of people’s voices in the first eight chapters. Moreover, the section dedicated to the actual aim of the book – to illustrate the changes that have taken place in *Tarang* during the author’s 44-year absence – is the shortest. This leaves the reader somewhat frustrated that the author didn’t use his tremendous knowledge of Nepal to expand on his rich account with a thorough analysis of what is presented, which would also have made the argument more accessible to a readership that is not very familiar with the Nepali context.

Overall, *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed* is a noble and courageous endeavour to look back in critical terms at the work of a lifetime. Furthermore, the book bravely tackles a paramount issue in the history of anthropology: namely, that ignoring people’s actual lives inevitably leads to overlooking the nuances that characterise our subject matter. Fisher encourages us to ponder what the real focus of the discipline is: the abstract forces that shape people’s lives, or the actual people who in turn give shape to them? In doing so, the book offers an outstanding contribution to the rapidly growing body of literature that seems to actualise the ‘second phase’ of anthropological research in Nepal as predicted by Gérard Toffin (2009: 284), which, following on from an initial stage dedicated to a rather essentialist cataloguing of people and practices, is now animated by a more intimate existential sensibility.
References


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