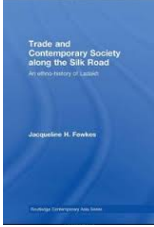


REVIEW – *TRADE AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY
ALONG THE SILK ROAD*

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Jacqueline H Fewkes. 2011. *Trade and Contemporary Society Along the Silk Road: An Ethno-History of Ladakh*. London: Routledge. xiii+196pp; list of plates, figures, maps, and tables; preface, acknowledgements, conclusion, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780415775557, (hardback 100£), ISBN 9780415693158

(paper 28£).

Ladakh in the twenty-first century is well known as a religious and touristic destination as well as an Indian border territory with Kargil and Siachin - significant military posts. In contrast, the commercial role of Ladakh in trade within the Himalayan region and along the Silk Route is less explored.

In this well-researched book, Fewkes presents various components of Ladakh's ethno-history of trade. She focuses on Ladakh since the eighteenth century and its status as a trade center in pre-independence India and thereafter. Its lost legacy of trade and commerce and associated facets of its culture, history, and future challenges are presented compactly in less than 200 pages.

The book features an introduction and seven chapters, and is divided into three parts. Part I: Settings, has two chapters: "Beyond the Roof of the World", and "Recognising the Terrain: An Historical Background". Part II: Historical Trade, consists of "The Family Business: Community, Kinship, and Identity"; "Social Strategies for Profit"; "Living in a Material World: Cosmopolitan Elites"; and "The Demise of Trade: Coping with Borders". Part III: The Modern

Context consists of the final chapter, "The Memory and Legacy of Trade".

With a flair for narration, Fawkes weaves history and ethnography, moving from archival data to narratives of exploring these archives in Kargil, Kashmir, and Punjab. The author prefaces each chapter with descriptions of her encounters with people and their environs in the course of her research and thereafter, step by step, unveils the contents directly linked to these accounts. This technique draws readers into her historical descriptions.

Before further introducing the book and its contents, I wish to cite from the author's discussion of the work's objectives in the conclusion (168-169):

This research was undertaken as ethnohistorical work simply because there was no other way through which to understand the topic. "Ladakhi-ness", as an identity constructed through the interpretation of past and present, must be understood through a study of both.

In studying 'Ladakhi' identity, the author extensively researched the region and its background using an ethno-historical approach. She presents arguments that 'Ladakhi' identity was created through trade relations among various communities that settled in the region and thus formed a cosmopolitan Ladakhi identity. She argues that being 'Ladakhi' is not an ethnic or regional identity, but is rather a multifaceted, multi-layered, and multi-ethnic intermingling of community identities. This issue of cosmopolitanism is discussed in various sections of the book, most importantly in Chapter Five "Living in a Material World: Cosmopolitan Elites".

The author gives a detailed account of the nature of her sources in the "Introduction: Global Memories, Local Accounts". While exploring the Khan Archives, she gives a detailed narration of reaching the archives, sparking readers' interest in the content that follows.

She judiciously addresses the nature of trade routes and their significance in the commercial activities of Ladakh in Chapter One "Beyond the Roof of the World" and Chapter Two, "Recognizing the

Terrain: An Historical Background". These chapters give detailed accounts of the communities engaged in regional cross-border trade. However, the author does not provide detailed accounts of trade routes connecting Ladakh with the regions in the eastern, northern, and northwest sub-routes of the Silk Route. There are several discussions in the text related to the Arghuns¹ (Schimmel 2004), however, these discussions are hampered by persistent ambiguity regarding the Arghuns' identity. The author could have resolved this issue had historical sources been considered, in addition to the ethnographic accounts. In contrast to this unfortunate vagueness, the description of Ladakhi trade networks with traders in the Punjab is vivid and engages the reader while bringing to light the cultural weave of Kashmiri-Ladakhi and Punjabi culture.

In Part II, the author discusses class structure, social configuration and, most importantly, the value of Ladakhi trade in the north Indian economy before and during colonial times. Unfortunately, transnational trade in the Ladakh-Himalayas (van Schendel 2005) is not discussed by Fewkes, though such trade has contributed immensely to the formation of the cosmopolitan Ladakhi identity. Although Central Asian trade routes were the essence of Ladakhi trade, the discussions in the text leave scope for details that have been discussed elsewhere by such scholars as Hangloo (2000) and Levi (2002).

In Chapter Seven "The Memory and the Legacy of Trade", the author appropriately explains the reasons for the decline of once-flourishing Ladakhi trade. The border issues led to a fading of the cosmopolitan trading society in the region, and also created a regional identity crisis. The author discusses how the twentieth century (post-independence) political crisis and the 'scheduled tribe' status accorded the people of Ladakh have created new concerns.

Another important aspect of Ladakhi society that the author takes up is the co-existence of Islam and Buddhism. In the past, when trade flourished in the region, religious exclusiveness was not

¹ The Arghun community traded in parts of Kashmir and Ladakh. Accounts of this community's trade relations appear in Mughal records.

dominant in Ladakh. In contrast, the Ladakh of today identifies primarily with Buddhist traditions. In the twenty-first century, Ladakh has become the ultimate tourist destination, has lost its wider trading networks and cosmopolitan legacy, and is facing serious environmental challenges.

The book is valuable for insightful details about trade and society in Ladakh. The ethnographic approach in writing the history of trade provides thought-provoking details about people and their understanding of their past. Regarding the potential audience for the book, although the author's blending of literary flair with ethno-historical narrative renders the book highly readable, the specialized subject matter is limiting. Furthermore, the price of the book restricts the accessibility of the book to a wider, more general readership. Altogether, however, this book is a valuable contribution to the growing number of sources on the history and ethnography of Ladakh.

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