



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal. by James F. Fisher

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The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 46, No. 2. (May, 1987), pp. 431-433.

Stable URL:

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ign policy had been set by Prime Minister Nehru between 1947 and 1964; he briefly discusses nonalignment, economic goals, Sino-Indian conflict, and Indo-Pak conflicts to introduce these perimeters. By the time Indira Gandhi took over the reins, India's foreign policy was in disarray. Its economy was severely strained; shortages in food, fertilizers, and other basic commodities resulted in heavy dependence on foreign aid. China, courted by Nehru for more than a decade, had turned into a major enemy. Relations with Pakistan had not only worsened after two open confrontations but Pakistan had joined hands with China to stifle India's aspirations as a regional power. Rudely awakened to India's military weakness and badly in need of military and economic assistance, Nehru had turned to the United States for aid. Nonalignment, the hallmark of India's foreign policy, was thus in danger. Gandhi, displaying a presence of will, determination, and close touch with reality, changed the shape of India's foreign policy.

To manifest the distinct contributions of Prime Minister Gandhi, the author records at some length India's economic and political relations with the United States, the USSR, China, Pakistan, and other immediate neighbors. For his sources he depends heavily on newspaper accounts of statements, speeches, and events. Although he once had the privilege of a lengthy interview with Indira Gandhi, nothing unfolds in the narrative that could be characterized as new information. The book is laced with personal opinion, as the writer readily admits in the preface. Apologizing that he has not referred to any of the writings of many distinguished scholars on the subject, he goes on to say, "It is not because I do not regard them highly. Only that the schema of this book is such that it had to be essentially 'my thing,' so to say."

As a former member of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee on Foreign Affairs and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University (1971–74), Dutt is in a good position to state the case of India's behavior on the world scene. But the end product is imbalanced—short on in-depth analysis and long on personal bias. The author's concluding remark reflects the tone of the book: "All countries make mistakes and India is no repository of any superior virtue, but if we look at the development closely of the foreign policy of USA or USSR, much more China, where it has been fluctuating rather sharply, Indian foreign policy has managed to retain the impression of stability and stolidity" (p. 437).

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Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal.

By JAMES F. FISHER. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. xiv, 232 pp. Appendix, Notes, Bibliography, Index. \$35.00.

Nepal often enters popular imaginations as the home of remote tribal groups cut off from contact with outsiders by precipitous gorges, snowy passes, and raging torrents. *Trans-Himalayan Traders* portrays one of the more geographically removed communities of Nepal, a village in the district of Dolpa, which lies on the northern border of Nepal with Tibet. Although the village of Tarangpur is a good two weeks on foot from the nearest modern transport, it is extensively linked to greater Nepalese and Tibetan societies by trade, more so than some communities in the urban alleys of Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Patan. Fisher describes these relations and the social forms of a pragmatic, calculating folk who have parlayed their ecological intermediacy into a profitable culture of trade. He outlines the strategic choices made by traders,

providing one of the finest accounts of the constraints on trading ventures that we have for the Himalayas. The historical importance of trade in the Himalayas, then, makes this a revealing study.

Although the people of Tarangpur were suspicious and actively reticent (if not downright deceptive) about their activities, a remarkably comprehensive portrait of a village economy emerges in the chapters of this book. After situating the village geographically and tracing political and mythic histories, Fisher reconstructs the patterns of village agriculture; he tabulates expenditures and produce, outlining the organization of production and the dynamics of the generation of the surplus in buckwheat and millet that allows the people of Tarangpur to pursue two separate trading strategies. One strategy takes them north to the Tibetan border where they trade their grain for salt with the grain-poor Tibetans; the salt they do not require for consumption they trade for rice in the more southerly hills of Nepal. They bring the rice back to their home village where they consume it in feasting. The other trade circuit (which has become more prominent in recent decades because of transformations resulting from the Chinese presence in Tibet) involves the livestock and woolen goods that they sell in the more southerly climes of Nepal and India. With the capital acquired they purchase commodities ranging from thread, cigarettes, and tea to batteries, kerosene, and toothpaste in the towns of the Terai of Nepal and India. They transport these in turn back to the village and eventually sell them in neighboring districts. The cash profits generated in this activity fund future ventures, are invested in gold jewelry and the like, or are expended in ritual performances.

Fisher organizes this ethnography according to a "transactional model" that discovers structure and value as they statistically emerge from accumulated actions. The patterns of trade that evolve in the Himalayas reflect the pragmatism of people like those of Tarangpur, their history, and their strategic intermediacy, but they also relate to equally concrete but less tangible values. The curious thing about all this trading is that it is not motivated exclusively by economic or ecological necessity. Villagers either store their wealth in nonconspicuous chattels or expend it in commensality that yields "prestige." This economy as practice, then, is also meaningful; it may be in the detailed transactions of rituals that this dimension of culture and society in Tarangpur could be revealed, but this would be another book.

In addition to the logistics of trade, Fisher explores the cultural position of the people of Tarangpur in the greater Himalayas and the social structure of the village. Although they call themselves Magar when asked in Nepali, their identity remains ambiguous; villagers appear actively to veil their practices and identity (to the frustration of the ethnographer) partially as an interactive strategy with outsiders. They speak Kaike—a Tibeto-Burman language different from Kham Magar—and are fluent in both Tibetan and Nepali. They also show great facility in moving across the boundaries of Nepalese and Tibetan societies, a requirement of their trading life. Nevertheless they have a clear sense of belonging to a distinct and separate community. Their ritual system incorporates both Buddhist and Hindu practices. If an ideology of pure and impure articulates Hinduism, however, these people are closer to other Tibeto-Burman groups than caste Hindus to the south. Of particular interest on the village level is the presence of a publicly muted system of marriage classes in a society manifestly and vigorously egalitarian in ideology; clans, though, do not regulate marriage as they do in most other Tibeto-Burman groups of Nepal.

In the end, Fisher presents a picture of a dynamic society managing its identity depending on context and a society that defies most of the orthodox images we have of groups in Nepal, whether Hindu or Tibeto-Burman in form. This accessible book

is a much-welcomed addition to the ethnology of the Himalayas. Specialists will find the numerous charts relating to agriculture and trade and several appendixes of comparative value. Moreover, the reconstruction of these intriguing traders is well written by a sensitive ethnographer.

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The Wisdom of the Heart: A Study of the Works of Mulk Raj Anand. By MARLENE FISHER. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985. Bibliography, Index. \$27.50.

Mulk Raj Anand, wunderkind of twentieth-century Indian arts and letters, is a novelist and essayist, as well as the founder and editor of a remarkable art magazine, *Marg*. Among his novels, *Untouchable* (1933) and *Coolie* (1936) are masterpieces of social realism, yet he wrote eleven others less worthy of note. In general, Anand's fiction may be considered one-dimensional, for he seldom enters the realm of symbolic values that transcend political viewpoints. His short stories, however, are also a valuable contribution to Indian letters; in these his unique blend of content and style, rendered in an English combined with the metaphors and imagery of Punjabi and Hindi, works very well.

Marlene Fisher's work attempts to deal with the whole man, including his Hindu-Sikh heritage, his alliance with the Bloomsbury group in London, his discipleship to both Gandhi and Nehru, and his involvement with the All-India Progressive Writers' Association. Painting him as a humanist above all, she attributes his ongoing commitment to human rights to an assumption that social injustice is antithetical to human nature and is therefore capable of being eliminated. Thus Fisher presents Anand as an idealist who never ceases to dream of the world's people coming together "to appreciate each other's differences in the humane spirit of a tolerant understanding, sympathy, and good will" (p. 174). Fisher, in turn, seems caught up in Anand's worldview, for she never fails to admire his humanistic stance, even where unsuccessful fiction is involved.

Although *The Wisdom of the Heart* is subtitled *A Study of the Works of Mulk Raj Anand*, it might well be considered an autobiography, for the chronology of Anand's life is the organizing principle of Fisher's study and an enormous number of the writer's personal anecdotes and reminiscences are woven into it. Indeed, during the discussion of the four novels in the projected *Seven Ages of Man* series, it is sometimes difficult for the reader to sort out Anand's life from that of the hero of those decidedly autobiographical novels. Scholarly criticism of Anand's writing is certainly present, but it is largely commentary "without teeth." Although Fisher occasionally acknowledges poor reviews or adverse comments concerning particular novels, she is quick to justify Anand's writing on the basis of authorial intent.

Two earlier studies of Anand's writing are the Twayne edition by Krishna H. Nandan Sinha (*Mulk Raj Anand* [New York: Twayne, 1972]) and Margaret Berry's thematically organized *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and His Work* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1971), both now out of print. In comparison, Fisher's study reveals a great deal more about Anand, the man, and the way in which his life has influenced and interacted with his writing. For concise scholarly criticism of the texts, however, one might do better to consult the Sinha and Berry studies.

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