

Buddhism At The Borders Of Trade: Colonial And Post-Colonial Discourses On Trans-Himalayan Economic Networks And Connectivity

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The expansion of international trade exerted and continues to exert considerable influence on the negotiation of nation-state borders and on the formation of cultural, social, and religious identities. While the relationship between religion and trade is undeniably complex and multifaceted, it has been suggested that commercial connectivity has contributed to the spread of religious practices, values and beliefs, while religious agents and institutions have invariably engaged with traders of the same faith supporting economic cooperation as long as it does not contradict their core spiritual values. While these generalizations may very well serve as historical approximations, diachronically the variable economic, social, and political repercussions associated with the expansion of regional and international trading activities have complicated the picture considerably as it can be seen in the multilingual and multiethnic north eastern hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong and in the Indian state of Sikkim.

This interdisciplinary research project aims at assessing the nuanced effects of trade in

- (a) the formation of borders (i.e. geographical, commercial, ethnic, linguistic);
- (b) the development of Buddhist markers and sites across the eastern Himalayas; and
- (c) the representation of Himalayan varieties of Buddhism in colonial and postcolonial discourses.

Specifically, we will investigate how British colonial policies based on tacit demarcations between the religious and the secular can be challenged from the perspective of multiple and diverging historical experiences which on the one hand question a rigid separation between religious and non-religious fields of practice, and on the other, accentuate the differences between inter and intra-religious groups competing for resources and visibility following the disruption of traditional commercial networks in the wake of a market-dominated ideology and world-order.