Addendum

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Chapter 8

Analysis of the field survey

The areas for field visits for this research comprised of several locations both within India and abroad, ranging from the northern fringes of the state of West Bengal in general and the areas in and around the town of Kalimpong in particular, to North East Indian states such as Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. On the international side, field visits and interactions with local residents were carried out in Kunming and Yunnan provinces of China along with many towns under the Tibetan Autonomous Region, including but not limited to Lhasa, Ngari, Thargche and Shigatse as well as in the Tamu area of Myanmar. These visits were supplemented with in depth discussions with local entrepreneurs and scholars from Sichuan Central University and Tibet University (China) over the course of two months as well as with scholars and local entrepreneurs from the eight states of the North Eastern region of India as well as Myanmar.

The theme of discussions during these field visits was centred around the scope of a revival of the old Southern Silk Route. Overall, interviews via questionnaire distribution were conducted with over a hundred respondents and this was supplemented with general discussions with local residents on the nature of local trade and its viability in various parts of the areas which were visited. In this regard, in many places, such visits would not have been fruitful without the help of the local tour guides.

The visits and interactions with local residents in Topkhana (around 20 km. from the main town of Kalimpong) revealed a sense of enthusiasm on issues related to the possibility of a revival of trade linkages with the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. This enthusiasm, in many cases, was based on the reopening of Nathu-La as a border market between India and China via Sikkim and the Tibetan Autonomous Region respectively, in the recent past. On an average, six out of ten respondents from this area were hopeful that given proper diplomatic and political will between India and China, this could be achieved and would also contribute to the tourism industry in the region which has started to witness a decline recently and is largely supported by the hospitality sector. However, it was also observed that this area along with many others in Kalimpong, had a sizeable Tibetan population who had left their homeland in the early 1960s for India and had arrived in batches at the town of Kalimpong eventually. During the interactions, most of them would express skepticism on the prospect of a reopening of these old routes for trade, mainly on strategic grounds.

The findings from this particular field visit were relevant given the fact that the present area known as Topkhana was one of the venues for holding 'haats' and fairs for the travelers and sellers from around the region during the days of trade through the Tea-Horse trade route. It was in other words, a very significant stop for traders during those days. Currently a military establishment exists at the exact venue where the fairs used to be organized. The interactions with the local residents would point towards two main viewpoints with regard to the reopening/revival of trade between India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China: one based on optimism regarding the potential of socio-economic development of the town and the other, based on the bitter experiences of having to abandon their homeland and the remote, if any, chances of rekindling these linkages without significant strategic repercussions.

This was followed by visits to other nearby areas which were of significance for trade during earlier times and which would be the main trade routes in case of a revival of such linkages across the borders in the region. Such places included Reshi, Pedong, Algarah and Sillery Gaon. The Damsang Fort is historically significant to the people of the region and on the basis of their responses during the interviews that were conducted, it can be safely assumed that the prospects of border trade have been more readily accepted here due to the focus on tourism by the local administration within the last couple of years. Hence, if reopening of these old linkages were to bring more tourists to the region, the majority of the local residents, entrepreneurs and businessmen would not object to it.

The contrast observed between these areas and Topkhana was mainly that while the latter was relatively unknown to tourists, the former were witnessing many levels of development with regard to tourism and were therefore in favour of any policy which would increase the flow of tourists, be it locally, regionally or internationally. One respondent was particularly relevant during these visits as he was one of the few porters from the days of the Tea-Horse trade route who were still alive. His first-hand account of the trade and how it was carried out presented valuable insights into the dynamics of labour movement, items traded, points of contact as well as the administrative set up during those days.

Around 55 km. from Sikkim's capital of Gangtok, local residents and entrepreneurs/ small business owners at Nathu-La, the border between the Indian state of Sikkim and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China shared some of the same views as those living in Pedong and Reshi. Although they seemed to be satisfied with the current nature of nature of trade across the border (discussed in chapter 4), many of them were hopeful of an increase in the number of commodities given the nature of trade in the 21st century. Some also expressed concerns that the trade may end up being one-sided and that Chinese goods would flood the local market. Hence, the need for a coherent policy in this regard was desired.

Another point that was raised by some of the local businessmen was the unregulated harvesting and selling of Himalayan caterpillar fungus (known in local parlance as 'Yarshagunba'), which according to them would fetch enormous revenue for the state coffers. On the other side of the border as well as in the borders between Nepal and China, Yarshagunba is sold for an average of 5000 Yuan (approx. 55,000 INR) per 100 gm and even US$ 40,000–50,000 per kilo in the international market, at least at the time of these field visits. For these businessmen in Sikkim, a regulated trade in Yarshagunba was therefore highly profitable, given an improvement in connectivity with international markets via the North-eastern region.

At Moreh (a town and market located on the border between the Indian state of Mizoram and Myanmar), although local traders mostly expressed their satisfaction when asked about the nature of border trade with Myanmar, many of them mentioned that the demand for Indian products was low on Myanmar's side of the border. On the other hand, goods from Myanmar were flooding the Indian side of the border. Another observation made in this regard was the stark contrast in traffic management between Moreh and Tamu (located across the border). While the latter had a well-managed traffic network, Moreh was generally seen to be chaotic which added to the woes of the local residents and businessmen. It was also one of the major irritants for visitors travelling to the border market to purchase goods, as pointed out by the local tour guide who had accompanied me.

The next location was Khawnuam, located in Melbuk Village, about 8 km. from Zokhawthar (India-Myanmar border at Mizoram). It was observed that residential quarters for the customs officials and staff have been constructed, along with a helipad. Composite Land Customs Station (LCS), situated at zero point at a distance of 30 meters from the border has also been constructed to accommodate different trade related departments and agencies. However, there was only one bank (State Bank of India) near the LCS. During the course of interviews and interactions with local residents, it was clear that the area had benefitted from the border trade and had been witnessing the development of markets. The number of small business such as hotels, restaurants and general shops have sprung up and transport services have also increased.

The views expressed by the locals would be supported on the ground when one would visit Champhai and Aizawl and find that these cities are adorned with products or goods that have their origin in Myanmar. This has to some extent, lessened Mizoram's dependence on Silchar (Assam) and invariably lessened transportation cost thereby bringing down the prices of goods. According to the local residents, agricultural products, meat, household articles and electronic goods are imported from Myanmar via the border market. Most of those engaged in trade were optimistic that an increase in international trade via the border market would be highly beneficial for the otherwise remote areas of the region, although some of them also expressed concerns regarding illegal immigration via the same, if proper policies in the absence of proper policies and steps by the administration.

In the state of Assam, interviews were conducted with research scholars working at the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Limited (NEDFi), from all the eight states of North-east India. Some of them had worked on similar issues at various points in their respective careers and therefore possessed a broad idea on the matter. Their views were mainly centered around the ground realities with regard to India's Act East Policy, in which the North-eastern region finds a prominent place. Aside from issues related to the need for improvement in the level of infrastructural facilities in the existing border markets with Myanmar, they were in favour of reopening the existing linkages between India and China along the old passes. Here again, the successful opening of the Nathu-La pass in Sikkim was cited by the scholars. The scholars had been working at NEDFi, Guwahati for preparing on a project report on the viability of connecting the industries of the North-eastern region with the neighbouring markets of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand.

In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the areas visited were Kenzamine, Bum-la and Itanagar. At the time of the field visit, no formal Land Custom Station was present here. The local residents viewed any revival or reopening of the old trade routes (of which there are many) only as a remote possibility, mainly based on the strategic issues that would have to be dealt with given the frequent claims laid by the Chinese on Arunachal Pradesh. However, upon interacting with research scholars from the state, it was observed that they are generally hopeful that this is an issue which can be resolved diplomatically and cross-border trade, much as in the earlier times, would be highly beneficial for many small scale industries in the region as they would be provided with new markets in the vicinity. The background and nature of trade via these routes during earlier times (until 1962) have been analyzed in various chapters of the dissertation.

On the Chinese side, the areas visited were Sichuan and Yunnan provinces as well as Ngari, Lhasa, Thargche and Shigatse in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. These locations were chosen keeping in mind their historical relevance to the Southern Silk Route network, either as the places of origin or as important trade points for the trading activities. At Sichuan, particularly in Chengdu, it was observed during interactions with local residents that the memories of trade with its southern neighbours have been maintained and preserved in the form of traditional/oral history and some old items through trade have also been preserved. On the condition of anonymity, one Chinese expert on South Asia also mentioned that if the old trade linkages between India and China were to be restored, given the economic potential in the 21st century, it could dramatically change the way business is understood, especially in the more remote areas. This was based on the fact that much like many of India's North-eastern states, China's South-western provinces are land-locked and thus would benefit from reopening routes that connect them with the neighbours. For this purpose, the Institute of South Asian

Studies at Sichuan Central University frequently organizes conferences and seminars and invites think-tanks and academics to explore the possibility of such a revival. It was also observed that a general sense of rivalry with India does not exist among the locals, at least in the two provinces that were visited. Most of them seem to be guided more by the prospects for business and commerce than by any other motivation.

The prefectures of Lhasa, Ngari and Shigatse in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China have been witnessing a rapid development of connectivity projects in the recent past, as observed during the field visits conducted between May-June of 2019. One of the most prized commodities sold at the local markets here was Yarsa Gunba (Caterpillar fungus) selling for an average of 70 U.S. dollars for 100 grams. The markets were reminiscent of the old trade via the Silk Route network that contributed towards the economic development of these regions as well. Some of the shops were engaged in the business of carpets and such businesses had been handed over from generation to generation. The local street food would also give one an impression that the days of the Silk Route trade had continued into the 21st century. Many of the respondents had only distant memories of the trade between the erstwhile kingdom of Tibet and India via the Tea-Horse trade route and were surprised that these routes could have a prospect of revival. On the other hand, it was observed that the Chinese government had been actively working towards improving connectivity between the cities and remote areas and those in the borderlands were no exception. For example, the G318 Sichuan-Tibet Southern Road connects some of the most remote areas of Tibetan Autonomous Region with the province of Sichuan and serves as the main mode for logistics in the region. Interestingly, the old roads that were a part of the Southern Silk Route network have now been transformed into highways and in some stretches, even four-lane highways. There is also a 5000 km long highway that connects Beijing with the Nepal border. This is in addition to airport facilities at Shigatse.

This could be seen in two ways; one leaning towards security considerations and the other through the lens of economic prospects for the entire region. With sufficient development of road networks and logistics in parts of North-East India and Myanmar, it is clear that a revival of the Southern Silk Route would be driven by such highly developed infrastructure today. It could be observed that a majority of the respondents would see such a revival positively while acknowledging that there also did exist a minority which were skeptical of any prospects in that direction given their own historical and political reasons.

Overall, it could be gathered from the field visits that a sense of deprivation in terms of socio-economic development does exist among the residents of these border-lands leading to the hope that the routes/passes which have been closed since the 1962 Sino-India conflict would be opened in the near future and provide them with an access to international markets. On a quantitative assessment and as per India's official trade figures regularly published by Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCIS), many of the commodities where the North-eastern region would have a comparative advantage in the international markets if better infrastructure in the form of logistics and cold storage facilities were provided by the local as well as central administrations. These are well placed in India's erstwhile Look East policy as well as the renewed Act East Policy, yet do not seem to be replicated into tangible solutions on the ground. These were also some of the concerns raised by a majority of the respondents.

The perception of development among the local residents in the areas selected for this field work varied marginally. This could be attributed to the emergence of new employment opportunities associated with the variations in the value and supply chain of commodities in the 21st century. For example, while interacting with respondents in the town of Kalimpong, one would get the sense that for a majority of them, the scope of a revival of the Southern Silk Road/Tea-Horse trade network would mean a direct boost to the tourism industry. On the other hand, when questions were asked to respondents from the states of Assam or Manipur, their idea on the subject was based on the prospects for the growth of the small and micro enterprises in the North-eastern region of India, which would include sectors such as floriculture, handloom, piggery, etc. This may be attributed to the recent rise in number of young entrepreneurs in the region who have ventured into these sectors.

The response of the Chinese nationals was mainly based around the possibility of creating an environment of economic cooperation between India and China, through a revival of the old trade linkages between the two nations. Many of them would cite the example of the Nathu-La border market in the Sino-Indian border in the state of Sikkim and how it had contributed to some amount of cooperation transforming from an ‘eyeball-to-eyeball’ confrontation between the troops of both countries to an area where goods from each other’s markets could be exchanged.

Presently, the discourse on the Southern Silk Route is shaped by the future prospects of its revival and the perception of the local residents in and around the main points of this route is based on optimism if they are engaged in any form of trade in their daily lives while the rest remain skeptical and have expressed concerns ranging from illegal migration to full-scale border conflict if the routes are reopened. This research and the field visits thereof have been an attempt at incorporating the various dimensions of the role of trans-boundary connectivity, prospects for economic development of the regions involved as well as the strategic underpinnings involved in the discourse on a revival of the Southern Silk Route.