

Fragile mountains, extreme winters, and bordering China: Interrogating the shaping of remoteness and connectivity through roads in a Himalayan borderland

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Introduction

Despite appearing somewhat archaic compared to the 'sparkling agility' of virtual technologies, roads continue to be the paradigmatic material infrastructure of the twenty-first century, vitally supporting the production, reproduction, and circulation of commodified goods and labour (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012). Roads enable the spread of governmentality (Hannah 2000), and the flows, especially the spread of electronic media and migrations, that usher modernity (Appadurai 1996). In the Himalayas, several scholars have studied the varied processes set off by the road linking of mountain regions to lower centres of economic and political power as network effects, an approach that is illuminating in its ability to shed light on the links between the local and wider scales of the social, cultural, political, and economic processes enabled by roads (e.g. Gerwin and Bergmann 2012; Murton 2013; Louaillier 2016). However, this approach falls short in accounting for the peculiar frictions, challenges, and openings afforded by Himalayan roads due to what the economist Narpal Singh Jodha (Jodha 1989) calls the bio-geographic, socio-ecological, and socio-cultural 'mountain specificities' of Himalayan regions and communities, which these roads pass through and connect. This deprives studies of Himalayan communities of an understanding of the interplay between connectivities of various other kinds – electricity, telecommunications, market linkages, embedding in broader political and cultural networks and flows – and precarity and disruptions brought about by roads, which are simultaneously geographically and socio-politically constituted. Saxer (2016) provides a methodological solution to bridge this gap between the network approach and the mountain specificities heuristic in the Himalayas by inviting the researcher to pay attention to the routes of human movement simultaneously in its geographical and social aspects, as well as to the embodied practices and articulations around journeying on these routes. My doctoral research studies how practices, discourses, and negotiations around roads – in the complexly intertwined realms of governance, communal life, and flows (cultural, political, and economic) – shape everyday lives, livelihoods, identities, mobilities, and

citizenship in the Indian Himalayan borderland of Spiti valley. Going with Saxer's (2016) proposal, this paper interrogates the ways in which certain specificities of the road network enmeshing the Spiti valley – namely geographic instabilities, extreme weather conditions, and the valley's border with Tibet (China) – have shaped the local community's experience of crucial state-led developmental interventions in this valley, particularly since the 1990s.

Field-site and research methods

The Spiti valley is located at the north-eastern corner of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh (HP), sharing an 80km border with the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. Administratively, Spiti valley forms the Spiti sub-division of the Lahaul-and-Spiti district, HP, with its headquarters at village Kaza. According to the 2011 Census of India, the population of the Spiti sub-division was 12,445 persons living in seventy villages, spread over 7,101 km². Geographically, Spiti is characterized as a high-altitude, Trans-Himalayan cold desert (Murali et al 2017), with settlements between 3,500m and 4,100m above sea level. Winters in Spiti (October-April) are severe, with several spells of snowfall and temperatures falling upto – 40°C. Summers (May-June) are very dry, and the temperatures can rise up to 30°C (ibid). Monsoons (July-September) in Spiti are generally very mild, but the windward regions south and west of Spiti, i.e. Kinnaur, Lahaul, and Kullu, receive very heavy rains (Meteorological Center, Shimla 2021). These weather conditions accommodate only one agricultural season, as well the official 'working period' for all state developmental activities, from April till October. The entire local population follows Tibetan Buddhism and has been designated as a Scheduled Tribe by the Government of India. This designation makes Spiti locals, vernacularly called 'Pitias', eligible for reserved seats in government universities and jobs across India, besides various other state benefits. Agriculture, government jobs and contracts, and tourism are the main livelihood avenues within Spiti. The valley is connected to the rest of India by two national highways: one from Shimla, the capital of HP, and the other from Manali, a popular hill town. Within the valley, these two highways meet, and

from them several link roads lead out to villages distant from the highways. The Manali road is closed for five to seven months every year, due to heavy snow cover. The Shimla road is open throughout the year, barring episodes of closure due to landslides, avalanches, and road construction.

My research is based on a total of nine months of ethnographic field research in Spiti, spread over four phases broadly corresponding with different seasons, between early May 2018 and late January 2020. Each phase generally corresponded to the span of a particular season, since road conditions in the valley were significantly influenced by seasons and seasonal changes. I supplemented this in-situ research – in Spiti and along the roads within and leading to Spiti (henceforth collectively called ‘Spiti roads’) – with archival research in Spiti, Shimla, New Delhi, and London.



Figure 1: A cliff-hugging section of the highway to Shimla, within Spiti valley (Photo: A. Pandey 2019)

Three defining features of the Spiti roads

The three defining features of the Spiti roads are geological instability, vulnerability to weather conditions, and the fact of this region’s bordering Tibet (China). Both the adjacent valleys through which the two highways leading to Spiti pass – the Sutlej and Chandra valleys – are geomorphologically very fragile. The upper reaches of these valleys are devoid of trees and consist of miles upon miles of loose boulders and rocks precariously balanced by chance. Numerous times every year, precipitation and blasting for road-widening in these valleys cause large landslides and avalanches on these highways. The landscape is geologically somewhat more stable within the Spiti valley. However, every day, both within Spiti and in its aforementioned adjacent valleys, moderate winds and animal movements on upper slopes cause small rocks to fall on these roads at lightning speeds, posing significant danger to travelers. During winters in Spiti, heavy snowfall cuts off road access of nearly half the villages for weeks, sometimes months. Winter snow on these roads, once compressed by traffic and time, soon turns into ice, making driving very dicey. Besides, driving on the Spiti roads is generally more challenging due to the absence of mobile network along several stretches of these roads; the long

distances between critical facilities like fuel stations, motor repair works, and healthcare centres, and the high-altitude and rarefied air. In addition to these geo-climatic and logistic challenges, Spiti’s border with Tibet (China) significantly influences life and road connectivity as well. Following the Chinese annexation of Tibet 1950 onwards, there has been a marked anxiety in the Indian state about Himalayan border regions with populations of the ‘Mongoloid stock’ (Roy 1956), which possess greater historical, cultural, religious, and racial continuities with Tibet than with much of India (Roy 1956; Demenge 2012). Ever since the mid-1950s, the integration of remote Himalayan mountain regions, including Spiti, into the ‘national mainstream’ particularly through road construction has been a policy priority for the Indian state (Kinnaur District Gazetteer, 1975). From then down to this day, roads travels to Spiti have seen varying forms of state regulation and surveillance, which have been varied in response to geopolitical, economic and cultural developments over time.

The shaping of development in Spiti by road conditions

Three key developmental processes in Spiti which have been facilitated by roads are cash crop agriculture, the spread of a mobile network, and a tourism boom. Each of these three processes has engendered important impacts across Spiti. However, the mountain specificities of Spiti roads provide certain caveats that shape how each of these processes is experienced and negotiated in Spiti. Green pea and apple cultivation were introduced in Spiti by the Indian state in the mid-1990s. These cash crops, particularly green pea, have led to a general augmentation of incomes all across Spiti, created a novel demand for migrant labour, as well as linkages with distant agricultural markets. However, the harvest period of both green pea and apple overlaps with the monsoons, when there is a heightened possibility of landslides along Spiti roads. Even a single day’s delay in the transport of the harvest can cause significant drop in its value. In August 2014, there was a dramatic case wherein two local Pitiya leaders, hailing from a part of Spiti temporarily cut-off from road access by a flash flood, were arrested on the charge of ‘sedition’, for publicly chanting ‘Let’s go to China!’. This sloganeering had apparently been triggered by the leaders’ frustration with the local administration’s apathy in restoring road access – in time for them to be able to transport their harvest to agricultural markets in the lower hills. But due to the place and the nature of the slogans raised, the incident raised alarm up to the highest levels of the state machinery, and it won widespread media coverage, including in national dailies. The leaders were soon released, and the road access was eventually restored. One of the leaders was even elected to an important tribal affairs advisory body. This episode shows the fundamental importance of road access for Spiti’s new agricultural market

linkages, as well as a strategy to negotiate better deals with the state in this borderland community that plays on the latter's anxiety's related to China.

In the realm of telecommunications, there has been an uneven but growing expansion of the mobile phone network in Spiti since the early 2000s. In recent years, the infusion of this telecom technology in Spiti has strongly challenged the primacy of roads in the local community's discourse about remoteness and connectivity. Pitiyas often remarked to me that nowadays, the villages which were as yet out of network coverage were 'backward' and 'losers' on the road to development. This was regardless of the fact that by early 2020, nearly all Spiti villages were connected by road; those that remained unconnected were all less than half an hour of walk away from the nearest road. However, in times of heightened vulnerability to the elements, such as during medical emergencies, the transport of harvested crop, and winter road closures, the difficulties of navigating raw physical connectivity with the world outside via Spiti roads somewhat sober down the sense of being better connected to world that is afforded by mobile phone connectivity. In addition, the poles and lines carrying mobile signal and electricity to Spiti go parallel and close to Spiti roads and are often damaged by landslides and avalanches along these roads, thereby interrupting network coverage.

Along with other tribal regions in HP, tourism has been officially promoted in Spiti from 1992 onwards, 'keeping in view the spirit of liberalisation' of the Indian economy in 1991 (HP Home Department 1992). According to a Spiti-based official, the numbers of tourists visiting Spiti shot up suddenly in 2016, to about 30-40,000 tourists that year, up from the 2,000 or so tourists a year that had been the case since the late 1990s. Several local key informants I interviewed concurred with these estimates. However, systematically collected data is not available on tourist numbers in Spiti until 2018. According to a source in the Spiti administration, over 2019, a total of 64,700 Indian tourists and 3,612 foreign tourists had visited Spiti via the Shimla-Spiti road. These numbers largely exclude the tourists visiting from the Manali-Spiti road during the six months in 2019 while that road too was open. Later, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the local community closed the valley down completely to all non-essential visitors, including tourists and migrant workers, from mid-March 2020 till mid-February 2021. Ever since, locals have reopened the valley and tourism has strongly rebounded in the valley. Among other things, this massive spike in tourist numbers is attributable to the visibility of Spiti on social media since 2014-15, and to the rising disposable incomes among middle class Indians, who form the bulk of the new visitors. Through tourism, the very factors that generally underlie the Indian state's anxiety towards Spiti, i.e. Spiti's geographic

and cultural continuities with Tibet, and its physically challenging (but visually sublime) roads, have transmuted into a significant source of income and livelihoods for many Pitiyas. However, the same caveat that is posed by the Spiti roads to telecom connectivity, i.e., the times of heightened vulnerability to the geo-climatic elements, applies to tourism as well. In addition, in tourism, there is an additional caveat in the form of an Inner Line permit requirement for all foreign nationals intent on visiting Spiti, and significantly stiffer entry regulations particularly for the nationals of Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan. Indian visitors, whether local or non-local, merely need to get their vehicles registered upon entering and exiting Spiti. Overall, these restrictions exist due to the state's perception of Spiti as a sensitive borderland, and in response to the geopolitical developments in certain countries in India's geographic proximity over the recent years.



Figure 2: The Spiti valley during monsoons (Photo: A. Pandey 2019)

Conclusion

Over the last three decades, there has been a gradually increasing diversification, multiplication, and acceleration of economic and cultural transformations in Spiti valley, particularly as this valley has been sought to be linked with wider markets by the post-liberalization Indian state, be that through agriculture, telecommunications, or tourism. However, certain specific features of Spiti's road connectivity play an important role in shaping the ways in which these different processes manifest themselves in the valley. These features are (a) the long distances between crucial facilities for safe road travel, and to major towns and markets (b) the passage through geologically hazardous and visually sublime landscapes, (c) the extreme winters, with heavy snowfalls, in this region, and (d) the routes of these roads through a sensitive borderland bearing geo-cultural continuities with Tibet. Thus, even amidst the deepening enmeshment of Spiti in broader economic, technological, and cultural currents, roads continue to play the central role in territorializing Spiti, and in defining experiences and negotiations around livelihoods, citizenship, and identity.

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