

Reviews

MAGNUS MARSDEN, *Trading Worlds. Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*. London: Hurst, 2016. 480 pages, 9 maps, £30.00. ISBN 978-1-8490-4354-0 (pb)

Images of Afghanistan and trade in the popular imagination revolve around the smuggling of drugs and weapons, perhaps sometimes involving the gemstone business as well. The worlds of Afghan traders and businesspeople who operate across borders have remained completely out of the spotlight. This has now changed with the publication of a landmark study by Magnus Marsden that truly is an extraordinary piece of scholarship. Marsden does nothing less than put together an anthropology, political economy and geography of trade in crossroads Asia, examined and understood through the lens of Afghan businesspeople themselves. In doing so, he is able to de-centre the dominant narrative on Afghanistan as a failed state and bring it into the focus of everyday cross-border trade and relationships as arranged and negotiated through the variety of people whose lives and narrations form the basis of this study.

Marsden's book is set against the background of the vast body of scholarship in anthropology on trade and trade relations, which he neatly analyses and places into the context of Afghanistan. Beyond that, however, it also shows how the power of narration can best be put to work: Magnus Marsden builds his arguments on the basis of deep and trusted relationships with his respondents, who share their experiences with him, allow him to be part of their social network and provide him with their insights into crucial decision-making processes and their knowledge of local and international markets. This information is woven together in a highly readable if sometimes very dense account, providing an exemplary illustration of the practice of anthropological fieldwork and the communication of its findings.

In addition to conveying the results of excellent fieldwork and providing the reader with a summary of the current literature in the field, Marsden also brings some novel results into the discussion on trade and trade relations. While earlier research tended to focus on trading groups and their activities, this book focuses on the practice of individual traders and how they negotiate space, borders, social relations, commodity mobility, material ties, global, regional and local exchange relations, and identity formation. This perspective provides important insights and highlights the highly sophisticated but thus far completely neglected role of Afghan traders in shaping the area of crossroads Asia.

All of these aspects are presented in nine chapters that rely on fieldwork results interpreted in the light of current literature. Each section of the book is guided by clear objectives that provide the reader with a roadmap to navigate

the wealth of presented material and information. The interplay between theory and fieldwork is well crafted and illustrated by numerous vignettes of various lengths that give insights into the everyday experiences and reasoning of Afghan traders.

In his long and rather dense introduction to the book Marsden sets the stage by placing his fieldwork in the context of trade in Central and South Asia and the situation in Afghanistan after the Western intervention. He is careful to counter the popular stereotypes about the Afghan people and traders in particular, and sets out to explore the role of trade in the post-Soviet and Afghan contexts and the constitution of trade carried out by Afghans living abroad. The chapter is very well referenced and interesting also for the reader who wants to learn more about the study of trade and traders in general. Here we are also introduced to the respondents whose narrations form the basis of the arguments made in this book.

The second chapter introduces Afghan trading networks in Central Asia, with a special focus on Tajikistan as one of the more important study sites of the book. Marsden reviews the literature on trade diasporas and trading networks in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia and its rather specific ways of organising bazaars and other trading spaces. He emphasises the role of cross-border relations and exchange regimes as constructed by Afghan traders themselves. In the subsequent chapters, different focal points are established: on trade routes and the material organisation of trade, on Afghan migrants and urban life in Central Asia, on what Marsden calls everyday diplomacies on Afghanistan's northern frontiers, on notions of hospitality and friendship as perceived and enacted through the lens of trade, and on the global networks maintained by Afghan traders in a case study of Afghan traders in London.

In between Marsden presents a chapter entitled "Migrants, Militants, and Merchants: Ahmed's Story, from Trader to Talib" that is set in the town of Kunduz in Northern Afghanistan close to the border with Tajikistan – the only place where he performed fieldwork in Afghanistan itself. In line with most of the book, this particular chapter is very rich in ethnographic material and presents the case study of Afghan merchants as a "tale of three brothers" (p. 208). It illustrates very well the relationship and interplay between regional identities (the three brothers being from the infamous Panjshir valley), professional identities as tradesmen, and Islamic identities as performed and changing in the wake of the Western occupation in Afghanistan. This chapter provides a quite succinct example of Marsden's overall approach: setting the stage through the presentation of clear objectives at the beginning that are based in the literature and guide the argument for each section of the book, and subsequently unfolding the argument by focusing on the real-life experiences of people and their portrayal through vignettes. The "tale of three brothers" is a prime example of how biographical research can be effectively incorporated, as this case study

from Kunduz relies in particular on the shifts in thinking and decision-making over an extended biographical period in the lives of the respondents.

Trading Worlds is a book that caters to many different audiences at the same time. It presents an interesting and important read for geographers and cultural anthropologists alike, while also being important for Afghan historiography, for borderland studies, and for studies on global and regional trade in general.

Stefan Schütte

LENA ZÜHLKE, *Verehrung und Verschmutzung des Ganges. Zusammenhang der ökologischen Probleme und der religiösen Bedeutung des heiligen Flusses*. Berlin: regiospectra Verlag, 2013. 480 pages, €32.90. ISBN 978-3-940132-50-5

The heavy pollution affecting so many rivers is doubtless one of the greatest socio-ecological challenges of India, taking on tremendous significance in the case of the Ganges, the holiest river of India and a lifeline for the north of the country. The decades-long debate on the pollution of the Ganges and its tributaries illustrates the many contradictions that underlie the cultural-religious, socio-ecological and also political-economical transformation processes of the largest democracy in the world. River clean-up programmes in India are characterised by a multitude of actors, unclear and fragmented spheres of competence and responsibility, as well as (practically) ubiquitous corruption and nepotism. The Ganga Action Plan (GAP), begun in 1986 under Rajiv Gandhi, is no exception to this rule; on the contrary, to many environmentalists and observers, it has become a symbol of the continuing failure of governmental – and partly also non-governmental – environmental protection initiatives.

A visit to the holy ghats along the banks of the river reveals these contradictions even to the casual observer and raises the unavoidable question: Why do devout Hindus continue to observe their daily ritual bathing in the Ganges, when they (must) know that its heavy pollution is harmful to their health? Why, after their prayers, do they throw not only garlands of flowers but also plastic bags into the river?

Lena Zühlke's book, *Veneration and Pollution of the Ganges. The Interrelation between the Ecological Problems and Religious Significance of the Holy River*, focuses in this context on the (apparent) contradiction between the (cultural-)religious significance of the Ganges and the socio-ecological problems of its pollution. She takes as her starting point the fact that believers distinguish between the ecological contamination of the Ganges and the religious cleansing power of the goddess Ganga, although these seem to be inextricably linked. This separation has led, in the author's view, to an "equalising of the ecological problems" ("Vergleichsgültigung der ökologischen Probleme", p. 21) from a reli-