

CURRENT ANALYSES ON SHIPKI-LA TRADE, KINNAUR, 2017

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This paper reflects on the most current trading activities through Shipki Pass in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. Apart from presenting economic data it discusses the background context, political conditions and some future prospects of the trading process.

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Tekst artykułu omawia współczesne przedsięwzięcia handlowe dokonujące się przez przełęcz Szipki w okręgu Kinnaur, Himaćal Pradeś. Obok danych ekonomicznych przedstawia tło kontekstowe, uwarunkowania polityczne oraz pomysły rozwojowe tej działalności.

Key words: Himalayas, Kinnaur, trade, Shipki-la, Tibet, China.

INTRODUCTION

In my own previous publications some false predictions in relation to the declining tendencies of total border trade value through Shipki-la in Kinnaur (Beszterda 2015, 239–259; Beszterda 2014, 117–134) were made. In the light of more recent research findings, I wish to take the opportunity to revise some of my earlier conclusions and interpretations.

For readers who are not fully aware of the issue, tax-free border trade between India and Tibet was reactivated in the 1990s. Until this reopening the Himalayan passes had been officially sealed since 1962. The first pass designated for this purpose was Lipulekh in Pithoragarh Distt., Uttarakhand (opened to all intents and purposes in 1992). The second was Shipki-la in Kinnaur Distt., H.P. – the subject of this paper (opened in 1994), and the third was Nathu-la in Eastern Dist., Sikkim (since 2006). These three are to date the only authorized entry points under the Indo-China treaty of Trans-Himalayan trade¹.

¹ The basis of Trans-Himalayan trade was signed in Beijing in 1958 (April, 29) and continued until the 1962 war, being resumed in 1978.



Source: Himachal Pradesh Ministry of Tourism, 2017.

After 22 years of ongoing trade exchange, it is an opportune time to summarize this activity and pose a number of questions. This article will endeavour to furnish comprehensive answers although a caveat must be added to the effect that on many levels it will not be easy or sometimes possible to do so.

The balance sheet presented in the Table 1 clearly shows the values of both exports and imports from 1994 to the present.

It is essential to elaborate on the table above to assist the reader in interpreting it. Firstly, the number of traders going to Tibet has no direct relation to the total amount of single trips undertaken by them. Some of the traders were crossing the border once or twice a season whilst others some five or more. The record to date is 11 trips in a single year². In 2012, just 46 traders made 180 trips in total. Theoretically, Indian traders are limited to staying 72 hours on the Tibetan side but in practice this often stretches to five days in Shipki village where traders from Tibet come. The strictness

² Usually the trading season starts on 1st of June and ends on 30th November but specific dates are announced officially every year by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, the Department of Commerce, Government of India (once it commenced in May and stretched to about mid-October).

Table 1. The dynamic of Indo-Tibetan trade through Shipki-la, Kinnaur, H.P.# (See detailed info#).

Complete data set since the reopening of Shipki-la in 1994				
Year	No. of Indian traders visiting Tibet/China	No. of Tibetan traders visiting India	Export from India Value	Import from Tibet Value
1994	90	0	1 109 130 INR* (approx. 35,200 US\$)	1 493 200 INR** (approx. 47,400 US\$)
1995	63	0	764 194 INR (approx. 22,250 US\$)	1 654 000 INR (approx. 48,150 US\$)
1996	30	0	653 687 INR (approx. 18,200 US\$)	983 545 INR (approx. 27,400 US\$)
1997	39	0	1 290 953 INR (approx. 32,700 US\$)	2 176 971 INR (approx. 55,100 US\$)
1998	30	0	641 090 INR (approx. 16,250 US\$)	540 545 INR (approx. 13,700 US\$)
1999	40	0	1 350 513 INR (approx. 31,850 US\$)	1 395 625 INR (approx. 32,900 US\$)
2000	47	0	921 170 INR (approx. 21,150 US\$)	2 064 450 INR (approx. 47,350 US\$)
2001	35	0	1 204 745 INR (approx. 25,850 US\$)	1 720 550 INR (approx. 36,900 US\$)
2002	32	0	1 720 550 INR (approx. 35,250 US\$)	2 581 630 INR (approx. 52,900 US\$)
2003	25	0	930 339 INR (approx. 19,600 US\$)	1 538 625 INR (approx. 32,400 US\$)
2004	23	0	1 262 680 INR (approx. 29,100 US\$)	30 730 891 INR (approx. 707,350 US\$)
2005	18	0	1 232 221 INR (approx. 28,150 US\$)	36 366 598 INR (approx. 831,150 US\$)
2006	18	0	468 060 INR (approx. 10,500 US\$)	289 010 INR (approx. 6,500 US\$)
2007	23	0	372 925 INR (approx. 8,550 US\$)	351 100 INR (approx. 8,050 US\$)
2008	18	0	355 046 INR* (approx. 8,900 US\$)	388 400 INR* (approx. 7,900 US\$)
2009	17	0	599 130 INR (approx. 11,750 US\$)	589 204 INR (approx. 11,550 US\$)
2010	23	0	786 700 INR (approx. 17,450 US\$)	1 062 600 INR (approx. 23,550 US\$)
2011	24	0	577 031 INR (approx. 12,950 US\$)	919 940 INR (approx. 20,600 US\$)
2012	46	0	8 980 460 INR (approx. 175,550 US\$)	8 729 030 INR (approx. 170,650 US\$)

Table 1. Continued.

Complete data set since the reopening of Shipki-la in 1994				
Year	No. of Indian traders visiting Tibet/China	No. of Tibetan traders visiting India	Export from India Value	Import from Tibet Value
2013	63	0	38 485 792 INR (approx. 562,750 US\$)	38 382 110 INR (approx. 561,250 US\$)
2014	80	0	38 351 173 INR (approx. 615,250 US\$)	38 501 185 INR (approx. 617,650 US\$)
2015**	71	0	50 105 609 INR (approx. 760,350 US\$)	43 605 900 INR (approx. 661,700 US\$)
2016	93	0	40 383 000 INR (approx. 603,080 US\$)	45 590 000 INR (approx. 680,850 US\$)
2017***	51 (27)	0	2 238 000 INR (approx. 35,030 US\$)	3 683 000 INR (approx. 57,650 US\$)

Compiled from various sources, mostly Indian newspapers such as: The Hindustan Times, The Times of India, The Tribune (Chandigarh), HP Hill Post, and many others, then compared and cross-verified.

*** Approximate exchange value of trade (in US Dollars) in respective years was calculated according to the average rate of currency exchange, but mainly in the second part of the year when trade activities take place. Figures are estimations.

**** It was an Olympic Games year in Beijing. Due to security concerns the Chinese authorities closed the passes to India shortly after the trading season began. Therefore figures indicating a decrease in the value of imports/exports should not be taken as meaningful. In fact, in 2008, there was an increased interest in trading activities observed (at least a potential interest).

***** The opening of the season was delayed due to the so called Doklam standoff. Tensions on the border were reported also from the Kinnaur area. The first traders crossed Shipki Pass on 22nd August 2017. Although this text dates from mid-2016, some recent data from the autumn of 2017 was included (officially the trading season ends on 30th Nov. each year). Data for 2017 remains unverified and is cited after Pratibha Chauhan, *India, China border trade crashes after Doklam*, The Tribune, Shimla, 9. Dec. 2017.

of the immigration officers fluctuates in accordance with the season. Any tensions between both countries or internal issues that may arise delay the Spring opening or tighten law enforcement, leading to greater activity of the security services and army officials' inflexibility.

LIMITATIONS OF TRADE VALUE ALLOWANCES

Despite the restricted and short list of tradable goods allowed in so called tax free border trade (which I intend to reflect on below), the daily allowance since 1994³ has amounted to a meagre 25 thousand INR (Indian rupees), and remained at this level

³ In the case of trade through Shipki Pass since its opening moment in 1994 but in Lipulekh/Gunji since 1992.

until the end of the 2014 trading season⁴. Just before the beginning of the 2015 season the daily allowance was raised to 100 thousand INR (1 lakh)⁵ for the Shipki-la and Lipulekh crossing points. However, with regards to the Western Himalayan passes (such as Shipki-la in Kinnaur and Lipulekh in Uttarakhand), it is simply impossible to complete a trip to the Tibetan side and back in one day. So in practice the government approved a daily allowance meaning a single trip limit. It is one of the most substantial differences between trade being undertaken in the Western and Eastern Himalayas (Nathu-la, Sikkim). In the latter, the only trading market located in Sheratang (Indian side, about 7 kms before Nathu-la) is connected to Gangtok by an automobile-passable road. Again in practice, Sikkimese traders go there every day, from Monday to Thursday, and they are able to make real use of their daily allowance, which started at 100 thousand INR, from the moment trade started there in June 2006, and this was increased to 200 thousand INR in May 2012. The question arises what these figures mean in the light of comments made on the poor trade value in the Western Himalayas in comparison to Sikkim. First of all Sikkimese traders have been granted a 1 lakh⁶ daily allowance since the commencement of trade through Nathu-la. Additionally, a road was constructed to Nathu from both sides which has undoubtedly improved the trading potential of the crossing point. Those operating through Shipki and Lipulekh passes for long years found themselves in less favorable conditions. This article is not the place to deliberate about the reasons behind such inequality of treatment meted out to citizens of the country. Let us close with the statement that sometimes political and security reasons take priority over the well-being of the local inhabitants. It should also be added that if the issue of belonging to the Scheduled Tribes⁷ were added to the mix then this could open a further can of worms.

⁴ Para 2.8 a iv IEC Number Exempted Categories: "Persons importing / exporting goods from / to Nepal, Myanmar through Indo-Myanmar border areas and China (through Gunji, Namgaya Shipki-la and Nathu-la ports), provided CIF value of a single consignment does not exceed Indian Rs. 25, 000. In case of Nathu-la port, the applicable value ceiling will be INR 100,000/-" (Handbook of Procedures 2012, 8).

⁵ Public Notice No. 7/2015-2020, New Delhi, dated 1st May, 2015. The text goes on as follows: 3. The revised para 2.07 (a) (iv) reads: "Persons importing/exporting goods from/to Nepal; Myanmar (through Indo-Myanmar border areas); and China (through Gunji, **Namgaya Shipki-la** and Nathu-la ports), provided that the CIF value of single consignment of import/export of goods from/to Nepal; and Myanmar (through Indo-Myanmar border areas) does not exceed INR 25,000/-; and in the case of China, (a) for import/export of goods through Gunji and **Namgaya Shipki-la**, a CIF value of a single consignment does not exceed INR 1,00,000/-; and (b) for import/export of goods through Nathu-la, CIF value of single consignment does not exceed INR 2,00,000/-." 4. Effect of this Public Notice: For border trade between India and China, the CIF value per consignment is being increased from INR 1,00,000/- to INR 2,00,000/- in case of Nathu-la, while for Gunji and **Namgaya Shipki-la**, the existing CIF value limit of INR 25,000/- is being enhanced to INR 1,00,000/-". (bold mine RB).

⁶ 1 lakh = 100 000 and 1 crore = 10 000 000 which is the norm in naming large amounts in India.

⁷ Scheduled Tribes is a listed group of ethnic and regional minorities protected by the Government of India, under the National Constitution. In this case I am referring to the lack of appreciation of such citizens by the majority.

Putting possible reasons for such government decisions aside, a 25-thousand INR allowance is miniscule in terms of trade with, as was the case in 1994 (till 2015). It is no wonder then that border trade in the Western Himalayas for almost two decades did not indicate any signs for optimism. The bounce arose for two main reasons: first was the extension of the tradable goods list (through all three passes), and also due to simplification in the procedures behind obtaining an Import Export Code (IEC) and a license for such transactions. The IEC for trade through Himalayan passes was established as exception and permanent (No. 0100000134)⁸, and obtaining it allowed a single trip allowance to be raised to as high as 25 lakhs Rupees. Currently, it is almost impossible to import/export items beyond this limit⁹.

WHO CAN TRADE?

Kinnaur District is divided into three administrative blocks: Nichar, Kalpa and Pooh. The only authorized inhabitants who can apply for trade documents are those from the so called Pooh Block consisting of 32 villages, and of this number 15 are inhabited¹⁰. This area in total encompasses 3,384 km². If a map of the Pooh Block were perused it would be seen that it is comprised of Hangrang Valley, Ropa Valley, Moorang Area and the so called Upper Kinnaur (upstream Sutlej river). Based on the last Census, there are a possible 5,000 adult male inhabitants who might theoretically be interested in trading with Tibet¹¹. Women have never traded.

A potential Trans-Himalayan trader starts the procedure with a form submitted directly into the hands of the Tehsildar¹² of Pooh. It is then forwarded to the Directorate of Customs in Chandigarh. Each application is cleared by security services and intelligence officials. This system involves strict examination procedures (in some years only half the applicants were granted the required documents). Finally, successful applicants receive a Travel Pass which is valid only for one trading season. The short validation period of the document is a serious obstacle for some traders and it should

⁸ Persons importing/exporting permissible goods as notified from time to time, from / to China through Gunji, Namgaya Shipki-la and Nathu-la ports, subject to value ceilings of single consignment as given in Para 2.8 (iv) above (*Handbook of Procedures* 2012, 10).

⁹ Estimations of some basic articles are as follows: the best basmati rice was at that time about 80 INR per kg. So for 1 lakh one could export 1,250 kgs of rice (allowed to 2014). Since the opening of the 2015 season, basmati rice has been banned. Such an amount would be a sizeable load for 13–15 good mules. A similar situation occurs with *misri* (unrefined sugar) which costs about 70 INR per kg, and refined oil for 100 INR per litre.

¹⁰ *Census* 2011, 12, 52. Kinnaur is made up of 77 villages (inhabited and deserted).

¹¹ In 2011, there were 84,121 people in the whole of Kinnaur and 23,206 in Pooh Block, and a further 12,474 males, including children (*Census* 2011, 26).

¹² State administration consists of state, district, tehsil, and sub-tehsil levels.



Illustration 1 and 2. This sample document was issued for a trader from Sikkim but the pass form is standardized for all three Himalayan border trade areas.

be borne in mind that not an inconsiderable number of these sturdy people are neither familiar nor fluent enough to deal with Hindi bureaucratic forms.

CUSTOMS CLEARANCE AND LIST OF TRADABLE GOODS

Because all traders headed to Shipki-la near Namgia village (the last inhabited settlement, some 12 km before the pass), the custom post was located there. In practice, the custom officer shifts there during the season. This site is advantageous because a security service post existed there already in the past. Since 2015, regulations have softened with the introduction of the so called “single window” procedure. A joint post of customs, intelligence and immigration was established in Khab (near the influx of the Spiti river into Satluj). In addition to the obvious benefits accruing to traders who are now able to do all their paperwork in one place, the normal track taken to Shipki Pass runs parallel to Satluj, where an automobile serviceable army road was built (not through Namgia village). These days only the last part of the ascent to Shipki-la is still a mule track.

Traders come to the post with ready-made lists of goods to be exported including their quantity (counted in kilograms, litres, pieces or boxes, depending on kind) and including their value. Then the goods are unpacked and checked scrupulously with traders' personal IDs together with travel passes being cleared. Most traders are well known to officials because only a few dozen traders make the trip. Receiving the indispensable stamps they are able to start their trip to Tibet.

The reader should be aware that all of this activity is based on a list of strictly tradeable goods.

Table 2. Obligatory list of tax-free tradeable goods in border trade through chosen Himalayan passes.

Export FROM INDIA		
1. Agriculture implements	11. Dry fruits	21. Utensils
2. Blankets	12. Dry and fresh vegetables	22. Wheat (Ua& Buck)
3. Copper products	13. Vegetable oil	23. Liquor
4. Clothes	14. Gur and misri	24. Milk processed products
5. Cycles	15. Tobacco	25. Canned food
6. Coffee	16. Snuff	26. Cigarettes
7. Tea	17. Spices	27. Local herbs
8. Barley	18. Shoes	28. Palm oil
9. Rice	19. Kerosene oil	29. Hardware
10. Flour	20. Stationery	
Export FROM INDIA cont. – List extension since May 2012		
30. Processed food	34. Readymade garments	beads, prayer wheels,
31. Flowers	35. Handicraft and handloom	incense sticks and butter
32. Fruits	products	oil lamps
33. Spices	36. Religious products like	37. Local herbal medicines
Import FROM TIBET/CHINA		
1. Goat skin	6. Yak hair	11. Goat Kashmiri
2. Sheep skin	7. China clay	12. Common salt
3. Wool	8. Borax	13. Horse
4. Raw silk	9. Seabelype (Szaibelyite)	14. Goat
5. Yak tails	10. Butter	15. Sheep
Import FROM TIBET/CHINA cont. – List extension since May 2012		
16. Readymade garments	18. Quilt/blankets	20. Local herbal medicines
17. Shoes	19. Carpets	

The above list is too important to leave uncommented upon. First of all, the process involved in its compilation is quite interesting. In the late 1980s, during Rajiv Gandhi's term of office as prime minister, India had fruitful bilateral talks and commissions with China. One of the outcomes was an agreement reached on the reactivation of

Himalayan trade. I can only suppose this was when the list of tradeable goods was established¹³. The problem lies in the anachronistic nature of it. For anyone with even a touch of familiarity with the history of trade in this part of the world it is obvious that it was compiled from mid-19th century sources. For a long time, Upper Kinnaur and the neighboring parts of Lahul and Spiti were neglected in an independent India but the situation was diametrically different at the beginning of the 1990s. Who would be looking to import borax, salt or seabelyipe? Borax (sodium borate) was traded from Tibet even in early medieval times and was indispensable in the ceramic industry, steel manufacturing, medicine and black powder production. Salt (common salt is what it is referred to on the list) was in fact a selection of up to a dozen of varying kinds. Rock salt comes in different colours, from greyish, greenish to peach. Some salts were imported for animals as licking substances (greyish), and those of yellowish and peach color were recognized as most suitable for human consumption. This is no longer required after three decades of sealed borders and when cheap salt has become widely available from the Indian lowlands. The inclusion of seabelyipe (magnesium rock) on the list, in particular, garnered jokes among the inhabitants at the time of trade reactivation. Even the oldest of them could not in many instances recall what seabelyipe was¹⁴. For those who believe that in modern times common sense prevails they might be surprised to learn that without warning, in 2014, the Custom Commissionerate of the Union Ministry of Finance banned Chinese ceramic products based on an entirely new interpretation of the listed “China clay”. This new vision consisted of clay in a raw state. It needs to be pointed out there is not even one single pottery manufacturer in Kinnaur, not to mention the complete absence of any modern ceramic factory. The question naturally arises who needs to trade with raw clay brought from China and what possible profit can be made from doing so.

Another good example of this present way of thinking is one more ban announced before the 2013 trading season concerning goats, sheep and horses. What is of interest is the legal basis emanating from the Livestock Importation Act 1898, restricting the present import “of horses and other equidae through only four international ports at Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai”. The document also mentions a lack of quarantine facilities in the vicinity of Shipki-la in regard to horses (see: *The Times of India*, August 13, 2013). I wonder how many officials in the aforementioned Commissionerate know what *equidae* means, and that adding “s” at the end does not make the word plural, because equidae is a plural noun which encompasses horses among other). The import of horses (limited in number) refers to Chhumurthi horses (also

¹³ I have never found a single trace of the people responsible for the inclusion of certain items onto the formal list compiled by the Government of India.

¹⁴ Tibet was and is renowned for mining many minerals and its sources are extensively exploited by the Chinese. Many of these are needed in India itself but border trade cannot be as competitive as large scale sea shipments. Besides, borax has, similar to fluorite, lost its value.

popularly called the Tibetan pony). These quite sturdy beasts are valuable in India, not only as pack animals but they are also ridden. Chhumurthi are recognized as one of the six indigenous Indian horse breeds and as such are protected by law. *Equidae* also include mules, which according to my estimates, about 60 have been imported since 1994¹⁵. In the last year before the ban (2012) nearly 2,000 goats along with a combined total of some 50 horses and sheep were imported.

Very interesting is the correlation between the import ban of animals from Tibet and the biodiversity on the Indian side of the Himalayas. All together crores of rupees have been spent to keep local breeds alive. According to Dr. Vinod Kumar Bodh, a veterinary officer from Keylong, “one of the most recent projects initiated is the State Animal Husbandry Department’s, Chhumurthi Horse Breeding Farm located in Lari village of the Spiti Sub-division”. This farm was moved in 2002 from Kamand (Mandi) but it is not the only initiative as Himachal Pradesh governmental units sponsor a number of projects such as the Network Project on Animal Genetic Resources Spiti Horse (in situ conservation unit). Within this one

“each owner of the selected broodmares were provided incentives to the tune of INR 300/- per mare on the account of partial maintenance cost so that healthy progeny is born. Similarly, the owners of the selected male foals were provided incentives to the tune of INR 10,000/- per male so that healthy stallions could be reared for subsequent breeding use. Recently Govt. of India has sponsored a project called *Conservation of Spiti Ponies in Himachal Pradesh* under 100% centrally sponsored schemes called *Conservation of threatened breeds of small ruminants, equines, pigs and camel*” (Bodh, n.d.).

Regrettably, the situation is very similar in regards to yaks, sheep and goats (breeds brought originally from Tibet). The Yak Breeding Farm in Kuppa (Baspas Valley, Kinnaur) ended its operations in 2004, after more than 30 years of no success, and the Free Range Yak Breeding project near Lata village (Chamoli Distt., Uttarakhand, near Nanda Devi Sanctuary) fared no better. Since the beginning of independence large sums of money have been spent to maintain Himalayan breeds but this has proved difficult without an injection of fresh blood. Undeniably, some decisions of the central government are contradictory to state policy (sponsored by the same Delhi agendas).

Undoubtedly, India is an enormous country with numerous problems resulting from its heavily hierarchized structure of administration and distance between the centres of power and local problems, even if local custom officers located near the border are aware of the indigenous people’s needs. More on high level bureaucrats and their influence on crucial decisions taken in regard to border trading activities will be discussed later in the closing subsection.

¹⁵ It is practically impossible to count precisely their number, because there were listed as horses. Estimated figures comes from personal interviews with traders.

HOW MUCH CAN BE EARNED ON TRADE?

Turning to the prices to be charged and profits reaped in Trans-Himalayan trade, it can be said that historically, the main imported good was wool and today it still maintains a strong position. Raw wool of average quality costs in Tibet around 700 INR (declared value). Good class wool can fetch as much as 1,500 INR, and superior pure pashmina up to 2500 INR per kg. Thus profits on wool can be up to 1000% but traders are faced with numerous obstacles, bans, short seasons and bureaucracy which have to be overcome. Prices in Tibet have been increasing over the last number of years. In 2011, raw wool could be bought for 30 INR per kg and selling it in India for a sum 10 times larger was not a particular problem. For good quality goat's wool the trader could reap profits of even 30 times the basic price. Despite higher prices average profit remains almost the same. The main reason for the increase of local Tibetan prices for wool is the activity of government and private agencies who are buying it. In this case, demand exceeds possible supply but the price offered by Indian partners is one which is difficult to be beaten by the Chinese. Additionally, in this kind of trading partnership it is not only economic reasons which need to be taken into account but also political and social ones.

Livestock is still in a great demand in the Indian highlands. During the last season before the ban, a goat (the most favorable Chigu breed) cost between 1800–2000 INR (2012) in Tibet. Similar prices were paid for sheep but for Chamurthi horses (ponies) prices of even between 7500–8000 INR (2012) could be fetched. Goats and sheep can bring in profits of 200–250% whilst that from a good horse as much as 500–600%. The animals are sold directly to private breeders through personal purchase orders or during big local fairs such as Lavi Mela in Rampur (October) and Reckong Peo (November) each year. Originally, Lavi Mela was organized always in November, after the harvest and at the end of the trading season but only in Rampur, the capital of the Rampur-Bushahr principality. Its history dates back to the second half of 17th century, although possibly a much longer genealogy may be involved. The organization of a second Lavi Mela in Reckong Peo (before the Rampur one in October) is a new idea of the local authorities in order to boost the local economy and it has been in existence since 2006.

From the list of historical trading items, some yak tails are still being brought but demand is limited to Buddhist, Hindu and local Devtas religious purposes such as those practiced in home ceremonies. A market is also provided by tourists. In 2015, the price at the border was about 2200 INR per kg. In addition, some yak hair is imported and mainly used for ropes and tents but nowadays yak hair is usually a cover for yak wool, because the latter is not listed. Although rare, yak wool (worsted) is superior to both sheep and similarly called Cashmere. At the entry point, it is priced 600–800 INR per kg (almost the same price as for sheep wool). For such items profits of three to fourfold are possible to acquire. Newly permissible trading articles since

2012 have also found favour, expressly when banned livestock had to be replaced. These include shoes, jackets, blankets, carpets and T-shirts mainly. On such goods profits of 200–300% are achievable.

Export items form a much longer list and from traditional goods some *gur* and *misri* (unrefined sugar), spices, tobacco, cigarettes and rice together with barley is being traded, as well as dry fruits and vegetable oil (mostly of the mustard variety), biscuits, copper utensils, brass ones, occasionally also factory-produced agricultural tools and locally made ones. Indian traders do not take fresh apples with them (late season is fruit harvest time) because Tibetans have their own apple trees.

Examples of singular trade trips (prior to 2013) included that of 100 kg of *gur*, a number of big tarpaulins (so called *tirpal*) plus mustard oil in cans (160 litres), all together worth merely 7000 INR which were traded for 20 goats worth in India at least 40,000 INR. During interviews¹⁶ with Indian traders it turns out that most of them take goods on order for particular families (households). In such cases a few bags of onions, flour and spices are included in a single shift.

What is quite surprising is that from 2013 onwards, a considerable amount of woolen carpets have been exported to Tibet and there has been a good market for them. Since almost time immemorial they have been brought from such big centres as Gartok and Shigatse. The same situation holds true with Indian tea. Nowadays, just a handful of families still use the famous Chinese brick tea and make *chha* (Kinnauri), *ghurghur* (Ladakhi) or butter tea out of it. Most of the Kinnauris used to take cheap Indian tea instead. Now in regard to the export of good quality Indian tea to Tibet it is most probably the effect of contemporary higher living standards there¹⁷. This corresponds to present similar demand for the best quality Indian rice in Tibet. Buyers are not interested in the basic brands of rice when they have open access to Chinese types.

Today's border exports from India are mostly made up of spices, oil, processed and canned food, mostly dried fruits (apricots, almonds, apples), tea, snuff, cigarettes, cotton textiles (*dhotis*, blankets and carpets), metal utensils, handloom shawls (woolen), pressure cookers, *gur*, *misri*, jaggery (unrefined sugar cane), wrist watches (not many), some ayurvedic medicines and biscuits. The bestselling spice in the seasons 2016 and 2017 was saffron (*kesar* in Hindi). The latter is a good example of local resourcefulness.

¹⁶ After 20 years of research in the Himalayas I still do not know which kind of data could be regarded as sensitive. Contacts with security service men and ITBP officers (Indian Tibetan Border Policy) have convinced me that the situation is worsening. Suspicion is the basis of everyday interaction. In order to avoid any problem, theirs or mine, I have decided to not disclose the names of my interviewees, informants nor their dwelling places, because traders form a small group and it does not take much to locate them.

¹⁷ Preferred brands of tea is a complicated subject. In this paper I do not refer directly to the history of tea imports/exports on parts of the Silk Road. All I have to say on the subject is that the British did not succeed in exporting Indian tea to Tibet mainly because of its high price.

While the best quality wool is traded with Punjabi and Kashmiri merchants, saffron is part of an exchange transaction. Undoubtedly, quality-wise is average but still it is a valuable commodity. Bought for 20–40 INR per gram, it is worth from five to ten times more on the other side of the border.

Imports from Tibet after the ban on livestock consist of raw wool, jackets, shoes, blankets and some carpets. Such an exemplary deal consists 3 pair of trousers (500 INR each¹⁸), 2 jackets (1500 INR each), 12 T-shirts (250 INR each), 4 pairs of shoes (750 INR each), 16 pairs of shoes (250 INR each) and 10 kg of raw wool (1200 INR per kg). This comes to a grand total of 26 500 INR. Possible profits in such cases amount to three or fourfold. Most of the single imports do not exceed 50 000 INR, and some do not even manage to reach 20 000. Only a limited number of traders specialize in the importation of good wool or expensive carpets and in such cases a single import can be worth 2 to 3 lakhs (custom value at the border).

JOURNEY

Most contemporary traders come from villages near the border such as Namgia, Dobbaling, Doblin, Tashigang and Pooh. Because of their proximity to the Shipki-la and the necessity of clearing goods in the custom office in Khab, the journeys are made on foot in the company of pack animals (mostly mules). As less and less people are rearing them, they often need to be hired. A single mule costs about 500 INR per day, and for every herd of 7–8 mules one helper has to be hired as well for 300–400 INR per day.

Once the packs are cleared through customs, they will be no longer inspected. Depending on whether the mules are hired in Khab or Namgia, loads can be transported by jeep on this part of the trip (from the village to Khab or to Namgia). If the trader is going with his own animals, the whole journey is done on foot. A good mule can be loaded with 80, 90 or even 100 kg, depending on its strength and sturdiness. A minimum of fodder for the animals is taken, because they can graze on lands they pass, and time must be always put aside for it as it is imperative that mules stay in good shape. Then fodder can be obtained in Shipki village on Tibetan side. Trips take approximately 3 hours from Namgia to the border and an additional one and a half hours from the pass to Shipki. It takes a toll on people and animals alike. Traders go together in small groups (2–3 traders, mules and helpers together). From a logistic point of view it is not advantageous to form big groups anymore. It happened only in the history to protect themselves from the attack of both robbers and carnivorous hunting beasts.

The present marketplace is located in the vicinity of Shipki village. It consists of a simple unfurnished guest house. Traders from India take sleeping bags, rugs and

¹⁸ Prices in brackets of declared value.

cooking utensils with them. Local people come to greet traders and there is always a cheery welcome and traders are helped in the unpacking of their animals. The mules are also taken care of and fodder during their stay is provided free of charge by Tibetan *panchayat*¹⁹, because it is important for them that trade be maintained. The guest house is open to all traders and again free of charge.

When the loads are opened the Custom Officer comes to inspect, usually pocketing 2% of the value of the goods as a bribe. Trans-Himalayan trade is tax-free but these matters are not discussed. If this specific duty is already paid in goods (the custom officer takes what he likes within limits), he then disappears for good. This is the only time when contact is made with Chinese officials. When, from time to time, any army or police officers come, time is spent talking, joking and drinking. Custom official do not ask for passports or any other documents.

Traders report feeling safe in Tibet and have built up relationships over decades, besides of some existing family ties. Since 2014, traders have been confined to the market area only. Prior to this time they were able to freely roam around, visiting dozens of villages to find better prices for their goods. Just after trade had been re-activated they were able to go as far as Gartok, selling items directly in the big market.

The duration of a trader's stay in Tibet is extremely important because it corresponds to the potential profit emanating from it. Not every item for exchange is ready and traders often have to wait. Although most trading partners come from Shipki and the neighboring Kyuku villages²⁰, some goods have to be come directly from Lhasa (a 3 day journey). In such eventualities allowing oneself a 5-day-stay is cutting things a bit fine. As long as Indian traders stay near the marketplace, Chinese officials do not care how long their visits lasts. Only Indian officers pay attention to the non-extendible time limit. Accommodation in Shipki market place is simple but free. Everything else is paid for with goods, small amounts of *gur*, *misri*, coconuts, or any other tiny items. Tibetans offer *thukpa* (Tibetan soup) and *chowmien* (Chinese noodles), tea or coffee. Basic food supplies of food are brought by the Indian traders themselves.

Trading practices have to be started with polite talk about anything, including families, present crops, animals, weather and so on. Then time needs to be available for tea and other refreshments. Then packs are leant over and the quality of the fare on offer is inspected with many questions being asked and many comments shared together with complaints about rising prices. Final negotiations are vivid but short. Within a few minutes prices are settled, both in Chinese yuans and Indian rupees, although Indian traders do not have any currency on them, neither of the Indian or Chinese variety. And it is the moment to trace the issue related to barter in an eco-

¹⁹ Local self-government based on the traditional panchayat system (from *paanch*-five representatives).

²⁰ It is not a densely populated area. Besides the aforementioned Shipki and Kyuku there are only a few other villages in the vicinity.

conomic and thought sense. What happens in Shipki border trade should not be called barter. Both sides involved counting in mind in their present currency, so it is a basic proof of cash and relevant currency economy, despite of the practice of exchanging goods as equivalents. Only final transactions are carried out as barter. This can be viewed as a relic of the past, a transitional stage, because most everyday dealings have been made in cash for decades.

The finalizing of the transaction depends on the situation. If the goods for exchange are ready, all can be completed within two days. Sometimes, however, there is a need to wait for the products as some of the goods are not available locally and so have to be brought from distant markets. Situations also arise where goods are required to be collected a bit longer than the allowed duration of stay in Shipki. In such scenarios trading partners pick up their order during their next visit. Trust is therefore of utmost importance and some features of the historical *gamgya* partnership can still be seen here. Originally, such trust (*gamgya*) meant establishing indissoluble relationships with a person's trading partner and his extended family for generations. In the past, a *gamgya* partnership was an unbreakable trust. An initial ceremony took place which involved the fracturing of a piece of wood or stone into two parts. Each of these were preserved by the partners' family and the exchange value of goods was established and kept for generations. To seal the friendship, a shared bowl of local wine with some golden sand was drunk. Since these times, all any trader has to do is show his piece of *gamgya*, and if matching the second part, it means that he is one who can be trusted and obliged to keep the promise of exchange. Usually *gamgya* families were trading only among themselves. Such a partnership allows trading partners to stay freely at each other's homes, receive supplies and fodder for their animals and additionally be viewed as a real family member.

During their trading activities and free time, traders and their associates discuss the matter of the future needs of both sides, both in terms of quality and quantity. All of this establishes the foundations for the next agreement. Nowadays, the best way of staying in touch would be by mobile but this mode of communication needs to be used very cautiously. The making of one call when both people are from near the border is safe enough but more calls may arouse the suspicions of security officials. Furthermore, it is said that calls made across the border from a distance can be freely made. Undoubtedly, if the opportunity existed to make several calls to partners at the marketplace in Shipki many problems would be eased. I wonder also how far this trust reaches during trading. I was assured that goods collected from local Tibetans usually are checked on the spot but commodities brought from Lhasa do not need to be examined. This comes about from the establishment of trust which has been built up over the course of many years, with standard always kept. Such loads are prepared for shipment and packed until their return journey.

WHO IS A TRANS-HIMALAYAN TRADER TODAY?

Above all, traders do not belong to the poorest sections of society as their activities require substantial funds, connections, along with certain mental and physical capabilities. It is important to possess a knowledge of the Tibetan language. In spite of the fact that Kinnauri is similar to Tibetan, it is impossible to communicate with it on the other side of the border. Almost every trader belongs to a Scheduled Tribe category, but it is not a mark of identification because in this area most of the locals are Kinnauris. Most traders are middle-aged with only a handful of young people interested in continuing this work. If they wish to carry on, they have to start accompanying their fathers or uncles and build up the necessary trust required. This stage is a precondition for future contacts. Additionally, this “schooling” interval is needed to garner the necessary indispensable experience. Many young people totally lack the required skills and even possessing knowledge of the local language in Kinnaur can be problematic for them. I had a talk with such a youth, who had returned well educated after years in Delhi. To people who addressed him in Kinnauri, he answered in Hindi. When I asked him why, he replied that he felt ashamed to answer in the local vernacular, because ‘his’ Kinnauri was rooted in his early childhood and thus he was only able to converse in a childish way.

The substantial trading trips do not seem like such an onerous challenge but they are still potentially dangerous. At such heights, the weather can change dramatically within minutes. Also, there is much to be learnt about the goods, their quality, packing procedure, animal-care and how to protect oneself on the road. To gain sufficient knowledge only about wool requires years of practice. Generally, the younger generation are not attracted by the trade. As was already said, they come from relatively well-to-do families and such parents usually invest in the education of their children. Many of them study in boarding schools, and then further their education in cities. The world is their oyster and many of them dream about careers in governmental service and not of their lives as farmers and breeders, who occasionally go to Tibet to earn extra income.

Other reasons for undertaking a passage to Tibet need to be separated from economic ones. Many Kinnauris living in the border belt have relatives in Tibet²¹. The trading season affords them the opportunity to visit them and to have ample time to talk freely. In addition, trading is an activity deeply rooted in the history of the region and thereby is closely related to the pride of being Kinnauri, pride in one’s local identity

²¹ Although such ties come from past generations, they are still close. The biggest fairs hold in Rampur, Lavi Mela, gave an opportunity to find a bride from Tibetan side (in fact to conclude an agreement with her father). Consequently there are some families who’s grandmas or great grandmas came from Tibet and their relatives are aware of it.

and their distinctiveness from lowland people and other Himalayan groups. It is also connected with the present stage of the brahminisation process. Basically, Buddhists are not respected and regarded as equals in their own territory. This is heightened and easily observable during the seasonal visits made by Indian tourists (mostly high class ones from West Bengal and Maharashtra) and by apple and generally fruit contractors along with sometimes even government officials. This is another wide and complex problem and openly most of these visitors will deny any accusations of their behaviour, but they stick to themselves and limit any talks with locals to the bare minimum. The matter is complicated further by the national policies of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) leadership, through their advocacy of vegetarianism by all “good Hindus” and so on²².

FUTURE IDEAS AND PROSPECTS

Local government officials are aware of the importance of keeping Trans-Himalayan trade alive. Most of them that I had the opportunity to meet impressed me with their competence. Lack of competence increases the further one goes from the border. Geographical knowledge is weak, names are misspelt, awareness of local weather conditions is non-existent and bureaucracy slows down everything. India loves having a huge administrative apparatus and their officials love to be begged for every detail. I mean here mostly this “feudal hierarchy” as an integral part of a line of thought.

My words may appear to be very harsh but for vibrant trade to flourish it is imperative that the best possible communication exist between the local and the centre and speed is essential. It is unacceptable to wait for an answer from Delhi for a year or two or to receive no answer at all if this suits high ranking officials. The gulf between Delhi and local governments is unimaginatively enormous.

There are things which could be done to enhance the situation without the necessity for huge outlays. There are some ideas being shared between local authorities, traders and scientists working in this field. One of them is to open access to border trade to all the inhabitants of Kinnaur. The prospect of “open borders” for every Indian citizen is unrealistic, although it was promised for 2012, then delayed to 2014, and now the matter seems to be shrouded in silence. If border trading for every Kinnauri is a step too far then maybe for the inhabitants from the area starting from Reckong Peo upstream of the Sutlej (Kalpa Block) it could become a reality.

Language courses of basic Tibetan could be organized for potential traders-to be. This would only take just a number of weeks, because only smatter knowledge of

²² I am not writing here about the grey and black markets, semi-legal dealings, and trading practices which exist through theoretically closed entry points to Tibet (among a few others Loma in Nyoma Block, Ladakh, and Kaurik at Kinnaur and Spiti border).

terms, expressions and numerals is needed (not literary language). Going hand in hand with this some information could be disseminated about the area, people, customs and behaviour. Present traders are not afraid of competition and most great potential traders-to be with open arms as they believe the greater their number the more likely their voices will be better heard, even in Delhi.

Some trader demands have been formulated by themselves and sent through official channels. The extension of the list of tradable, tax free goods tops the list and in particular the restoration of animal imports. It was said the veterinary post with quarantine facilities would be located in the Chuppan area (a deserted village in fact)²³. At present, the Indian Army has returned this area to the local authorities with the promise that a veterinary post would be opened in 2017 but the actual date of opening remains uncertain to the present. When finally the post and market place in Chuppan are ready to receive their first Tibetan traders, it will bring to an end a story which began at the beginning of border trade reactivation in 1994 or even before that if the preparatory process is taken into account.

The bilateral talks between Indian and Chinese government officials regarding the reactivation of border trade started in 1988 leading to a *Memorandum Between the Government of the PRC and the Government of India on the Resumption of Border Trade* being signed on December 13th, 1991. It turned out that it was impossible to open Lipulekh the same year and a similar state of affairs arose with the opening of Shipki-la. The document entitled *Protocol Between The Government of the PRC and the Government of India for Extension of Border Trade Across Shipkila Pass* was signed (as effective from the date) on September 7th, 1993 but again no possibility to open trade existed in 1993. Lipulekh was proposed to initiate the process with Shipki-la chosen to follow suit. From the very initial stages, the Himachal Pradesh state government was fully aware of the need to prepare the market place on the Indian side. Nothing was done in this matter for over two decades. The truth of the matter is that Delhi and Shimla (as centres of the decision making process) did not make the slightest move in building the prerequisite market, endowed with all necessary buildings: a security service branch, a custom and veterinary post, a guest house, and so on. When nothing was done for years in this direction, every official report or journal article contained the statement that so far no single Tibetan trader has crossed the border. The truth was that there was no place for him to go as no procedures had been established and there was no place to stay or no place to trade ready to receive him on Indian soil. In this matter it is unfair to lay all the blame on the Chinese for not allowing Tibetans to go to India for trading purposes. It is interesting to note that a very similar abandonment

²³ Quite interesting is the background to the present problem in regards to the opening of the market place in Chuppan. It is located some 6 kms from Namgia village, in the direction of Shipki Pass. Once the place was given to the Army the main opposition to handing it back were Army officials.

from previous arrangements could be observed in the Pithoragarh area. According to the *Protocol established between the Government of the PRC and the Government of India on Entry and Exit Procedures for Border Trade* signed on July 1st, 1992, both sides were obliged to establish market places at Pulan (Purang, Tibet) and Gunji (India), but the latter has never been opened.

The next problem occurring which dates from 1994 (1992 in Lipulekh's case) involves when the trading season is announced by the central government every year. In compliance with earlier bilateral documents, the trading season was scheduled for just four months, from 1st of June to 30th of September each year (the relevant section is article 2 of the above mentioned Protocol on Entry and Exit Procedures). Only ten years ago, the closing date was shifted to the end of November but this has proved to be not long enough as due to global climate changes, abnormal conditions have surfaced in the Himalayan region. In some years the Shipki-la stays free of snow until mid or almost to the end of December. Autumn is generally considered to be the best time for undertaking trade activities as this is the off-season in agriculture and after the apple harvest. Starting earlier would be open to negotiation as in some years Shipki Pass is accessible for the whole of May. Maintaining strict fixed dates is unwise as border trade is profitable not only for particular families but also for the whole district. Flexibility in dates requires no financial burden on the state economy as all the work is done by the traders themselves.

It seems that Chuppan market place will start operations, maybe in 2018 or a bit later. To fully utilize this prospect, a proper road should exist to it. If this came to pass, then Indian traders would be able to transport their goods by jeep directly to godawns (warehouses). This would make the activity easier, less dangerous, less strenuous, more profitable and attract more Kinnauris. More attention needs to be paid in thinking about the younger generation in order to attract new groups of traders who will be able to continue this activity in the future.

Additionally, the local authorities through their state government should keep up pressure on the Chinese in the hope of persuading them to open a new route for the National Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra to the holy place situated in Western Tibet (Ngari Province) just along the trade routes in Kinnaur²⁴. So far the Chinese authorities have proved skeptical about this idea but it is possible that if the case for a pilgrimage route and a border trade are combined and the issue is stressed at every available opportunity then a solution may be found.

Possibilities also exist to open Chuppan as a local attraction for Indian and foreign tourists (under special permit conditions) and to start bilateral talks with the Chinese about how to open a tourist route to Western Tibet through Shipki-la. I can imagine

²⁴ The National Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra (pilgrimage) is organised from Pithoragarh along the Indian – Nepalese border and enters Tibet passing the Lipulekh Pass (see Urbańska-Szymoszyń 2013, 143–154).

that such an idea would cause headaches for both army headquarters but such concerns could be abated by, for example, indicating one or several permissible roads crossing the most sensitive areas. Another idea might be to open other Himalayan passes for border trade. Such initiatives are well known²⁵ but to date no results have been forthcoming. Two passes which offer interesting potential must also be mentioned. For Kinnauris, it will be essential to legally open Kaurik. This would simplify operations for the inhabitants living in the Upper Kinnaur area, with Nako and Chango as main villages. So far the area is more renowned for the smuggling of pashmina and *shantoosh*²⁶ than trade (see: Bisht 2011). The second pass is Jelep-la in West Bengal²⁷.

The closing ideas are of a practical nature and were garnered during my talks with traders. Some of them have already been the subject of demands expressed openly and forwarded to the state government through the trade authorities in Reckong Peo. The intelligence clearing procedures are understood and should be applied but the question then arises why the validity of travel passes should be limited to one season. A recognized trader should be in a position to obtain the document for a number of years. Another trading obstacle which could be eliminated is to allow trading partners on both sides of the border to communicate by phone without this drawing suspicion on them.

The main trading item is still wool of varying kinds and qualities and this needs to be realized with further investments in programs to boost the local industry being undertaken. This would not be easy to introduce, but selling unprocessed wool is a huge loss of revenue for the district. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Punjabi and Kashmiri handloom fabrics are superior to any in Kinnaur and they are the main consignees of wool. Quality reaps financial rewards. To introduce fine handlooms in Kinnaur was once an important issue for the Moravian Brethren mission in the 1880s (see: Beszterda 2013). During those times they imported dozens of handlooms directly from Kashmir, together with skilled masters of the craft. Not much of this art remains in Kinnaur²⁸ but perhaps it is time that it be revived.

²⁵ Rajya Sabha, Question no. 323 to the Minister of External Affairs from 01.03.2007: “(b) if so, whether other passes i.e. Chola/Tangkar La/Funkarru La/Gore La/Kongra La/Nakoo La and Choroniyana La on Indo-Tibet border are also proposed to be opened”.

²⁶ *Shantoosh* is a common name for the wool of the Tibetan antelope, Chiru. Its trade is totally prohibited worldwide due to its potential extinction.

²⁷ The case of Jelep-la is very significant in the present stage of border trade. Due to its proximity to Kalimpong it was the most intensely used pass in the history of border trade. It is accessible almost year round, is easy to ascend and is joined by road with the main towns. It offers a ready-made solution. Political reasons play the main role behind the non-action. I hope more publications like: Diki Sherpa, *Sino-Indian Border Trade: The Promise of Jelep La*, ICS Analysis, No. 45, 2017, will change decision makers' way of thinking.

²⁸ I am aware of the presence of various sustainable development organizations which are making woolen products, as well as manufactories in Kullu and Chamba, but still none of their products can be compared with fine Kashmiri pashmina shawls.

And finally we come to the list of tradable goods. Debates on extending the present list should be constantly held. All that is required is to persuade the central Indian government, because the Chinese have an open view on the list. In fact, this is the crux of the matter as China would like to allow all products to be traded but the Indian side is afraid of tax free Chinese items flooding them. Seasonable trends call for flexibility. At the moment the inclusion of electronic items on the list would be a welcome development.

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The old trade road to Tibet. Sutlej River Valley near Pooh, Kinnaur, 2016. Photo: R. Beszterda.