

preliminary research report on anthropological explorations of the eastern himalayyas

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ARUN VALLEY TRADE²

In my recent tour of East Nepal hills, starting from Solu and proceeding eastwards to Dharan by way of Okhaldhunga, Bhojpur, Chainpur and Hile I noted the regular appearance of certain manufactured goods. In the teashops lining the route as well as in town bazaars, one finds stocks of batteries, biscuits, cigarettes, cloth, etc. Children on their way to and from school proudly tote a bag of copy books. Many are wearing rubber or canvas shoes. After dark in their homes these same children lean over those books, earnestly reading their lessons with the aid of a kerosene fueled brass lamp or a bit of candle. In the kitchens of farms where we stopped to rest, villagers serve us in glass tumblers and aluminium vessels as well the more polished traditional brassware. And occasionally, after an evening meal, conversation stops while the national news is tuned through the battered radio that only father or eldest son are permitted to touch.

A less apparent part of the economic processes the appearance and use of these goods imply is the entry into the cash economy. More than through their purchases villagers participate in the cash economy by sending their men and women down to the production centres of Nepal as wage labourers. This is not noticeable in the villages until one makes inquiries as to the whereabouts of other household members. Invariably there is at least one member of each household working for wages in a city or a government centre.

Emigration into the urban or administrative labour markets and demand for manufactured goods are two features of any growing economy. In Nepal these are easily identified although the mere geography of the country and the newness of the centralized communication system make their quantification difficult.

Attempts at quantifying the activity at either end of the economic process of production and consumption may eventually be overcome but meanwhile it is necessary to look into other areas of the economy where research can proceed. There is an extremely important stage linking the urban economy with that of the hills. While seen by everyone as an intricate part of Nepalese culture, it has thus far not been approached quantitatively and in economic terms. It is transport.

We all know that the transport of goods between any two points in an exchange system is itself an economic process. In Nepal, this is dramatically and perhaps too romantically illustrated in the bhria, or porter, bent under the distinctive carrying basket. We see him in the streets of Kathmandu and on the Annapurna and Everest trails. But he is moving in greater force, and perhaps with more economic meaning through the hill paths of Nepal, between the production and distribution centres of the Terai up into the rural farms and markets. Recognising the need for better quantification of this well developed transport system, a traveller on a survey tour that would take me over the very same trails as my already familiar road companions, I took this opportunity to examine the trade more closely.

I had spent many years travelling the hills and river valleys of Nepal. But it was only upon arriving in the Arun River Valley that the full impact of this transport economy made itself felt. Since I was equally impressed by the visual dimension of the 'transport system', I include that along with the quantitative report.

As we moved steadily closer to Bhojpur, first through Okhal-dhunga and then Diktel, we encountered increasingly more porters, almost all of whom seemed to be moving in the opposite direction to us, that is northwesterly - deeper into the hills.

It was with our arrival in Bhojpur that we sensed the first waves of economic activity, pulsating outwards from the Arun Valley we were fast approaching. Then, reaching the Arun waters, we crossed directly east and joined the north-south trade route. In that shaky ferry ride across the river, we entered the main-stream of the hill trade in East Nepal.

Our first stop was in Chainpur, still an active commercial and social centre which like Bhojpur is comprised of a wealthy core of Brahman traders and Newari craftsmen. Both towns are traditional brass-making centres of the Eastern Hills; their trade still flourishes, meeting the constant if not expanding market demands. Brass work from these towns are sent to villages through the Terai as well as supply the hill population and the tourists. Along all paths converging into Bhojpur and Chainpur both, we noted porters, baskets piled with worn and balckened brass pots. In front of the craftsmen's shops villagers exchange their now used vessels, paying a little extra cash for newly made pots. When we left those towns, many porters also moving out carried newly made pots, again heaped high over their baskets. Some headed for distant markets in Ilam while others set out for nearby villages.

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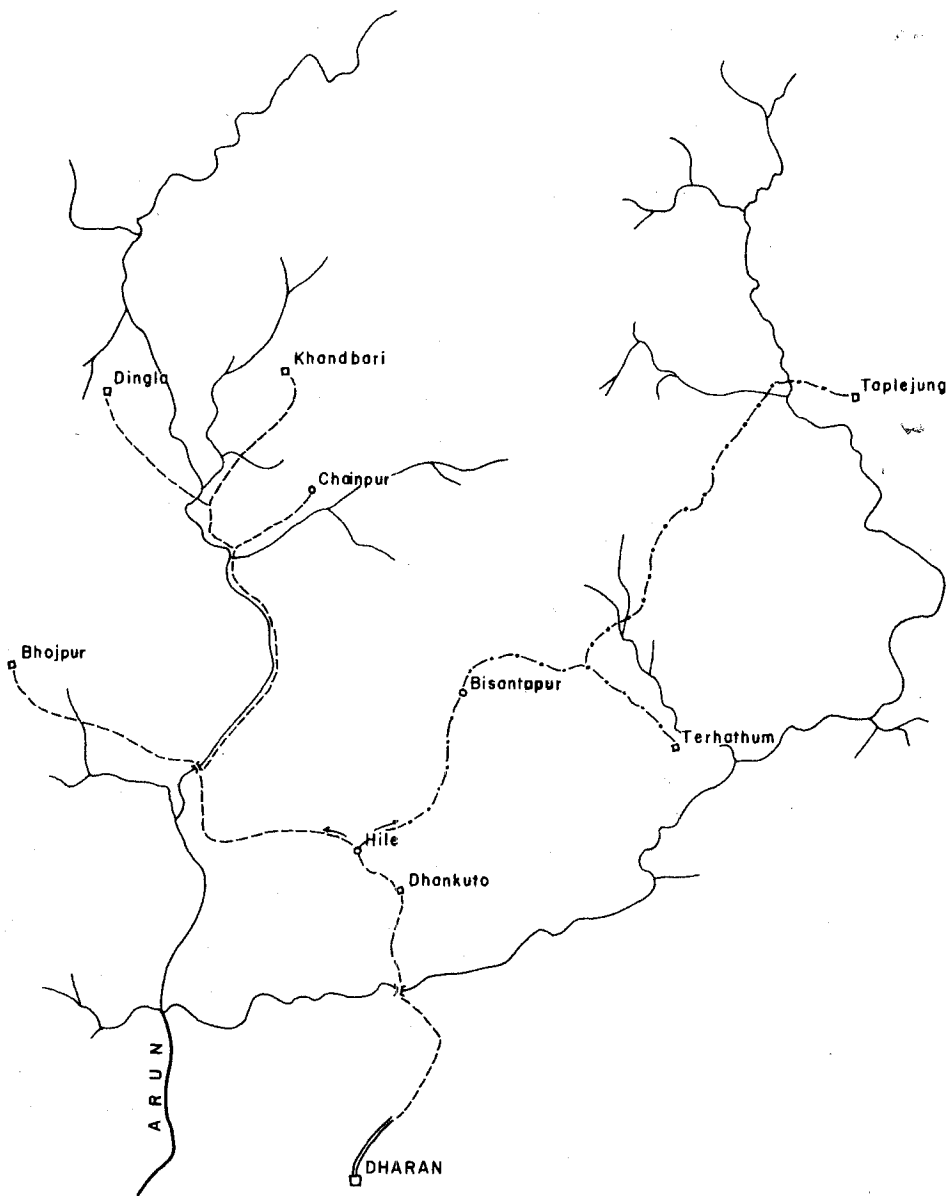
Some say of Chainpur that the new district office at Khandbari will drain some of the energy and wealth from the old town. Certainly the brass makers and merchants are as busy as ever, and a great deal of trade passes through. Although some residents are unhappy about the transfer from their neighbourhood of specific government offices, there is anything but a decline in commerce. The weekly hat is as colourful and crowded as ever, the Limbu festivals are still centred around and through the Chainpur cobbled streets, and tourists have now discovered the magnificent views Chainpur offers of Mt. Makalu.

We left Chainpur for Hile on a sunny afternoon, stopping at a Sherpa village above Mamling. On the road again, we once more encountered porters with laden baskets, passing us with increasing frequency. At Bisantapur where we pick up the traffic coming over the Milkadanda from both Taplejung and Terhathum, I began to take close account of what it was the porters were carrying. Their numbers were too great to ignore or pass off as domestic local trade. The grouping of porters was clearly not family or village organised, and the accumulation of their 90 pound loads, passing us, one after another, began to take on the magnitude of tons of goods.

As the scale of the porter traffic changed, so did our comprehension of what this trade means to the economic development of the Arun river valley - a veritable long distance trade system, which must have a firm administrative base at either or both ends of the economies it links. We observed the porters as a transport system with increasing interest all the way from Chainpur to Hile.² In that stretch, by the very character of the terrain and trail our observations of this process took on a new visual dimension. Because much of the twenty miles between Chainpur and Hile is flat, the travelled path is allowed to widen even breaking out into a 'double lane' of footworn sand in some parts. This portion of the north-south trade route is perhaps unique in East Nepal in its openness and flatness. One is allowed a view of up to half a mile; on the turns one is afforded a view far ahead as well as behind. Thus, the earlier encounter with individual porters, one after another in succession is changed into a panorama of people, in lines and clusters, passing one another in either direction and totalling up to fifty or sixty people at a glance. If one had any doubts about the magnitude of traffic, here is the convincing evidence.

Of the two main features of this transport economy, the first is the nature of manufactured goods going from the Terai into the hills. These goods are still confined to less than a dozen items, the main ones being the more traditional items of exchange: cloth salt and oil. The others such as copy books, batteries and shoes are perhaps more recent introductions and should provide some indication of the priority system of villagers applying their limited cash to the new possibilities open to them.

MAP



Scale 1:300,000

The differences of produce entering the hills becomes less significant when attention is drawn to the striking disparity between goods entering the hills and that leaving. While it is true that as might be expected, the goods going down are exclusively agricultural produce. Still there is a major imbalance in the exchange between hills and plains for less than one basket in 25 leaving the hills contains produce.³ That is to say that more than 95 percent of the porters going south are empty. The return of porters empty to pick up new loads once they reach Dharan also implies a considerable waste in available labour. The few with loads carry limited agricultural produce: guavas, limes and lemons, potatoes and oranges varying according to the season.

As significant as the goods they move are the carriers. The second feature of this transport economy then, is the labour trade, for the employment and mobilisation of porters is not a haphazard or casual occurrence. We do not yet know how many men and women⁴ enter this porter labour market, either on a seasonal basis or throughout the year. And we have not begun to think about their sociological organisation. However, data from this preliminary study points to the scale and ramifications of their system. For example, we find that of the Dhankuta bank's clients, the major one is a firm of porter contractors. Concerned only with Arun Valley trade porters, this firm of four businessmen (possibly only one of several such firms) does an annual business of Rs. 140,000. This is in porter contracting alone. Other quantification of the vastness of this trade comes from our 6 hours count of porters moving up through Hile. There in a one hour count before breakfast and in a five hour count through the main part of the day we noted 541 fully loaded porters on their way into the hills.

Details of the loads and destinations of the 452 porters recorded in the five hour period are tabulated in the following pages. The count was made on a single day⁵ continuously between 10 am and 3 pm. It does not include the downward traffic.

RECORD OF PORTERS PASSING THROUGH HILE, NORTHWARD

September 28, 1975 10 am.-3 pm.

ARUN VALLEY (Western tributary)	No. porters in group	Goods carried
Dharan to Chainpur	2	salt
	3	salt
	14	pots, spices, copybooks, cloth
	8	salt, oil ⁶
	8	cloth
	20	salt, biscuits
	17	salt, shoes, pencils, old brasspots
	26	cloth, shoes, tea
	18	cloth, soap, tea
	6	oil, kerosene, soap, copy- books, biscuits.
Subtotal	122	
Dharan to Bhojpur	5	salt
	8	salt, cloth, oil
	1	old brasspots
	9	bangles, copybooks, pencils, pens, cotton thread
	11	salt, cloth, shoes
Subtotal	34	
Dharan to Khandbari	10	bangles, biscuits, batteries, copybooks, pencils, cotton thread
	20	shoes, cloth, copybooks, readymade shirts, spices
	20	salt, biscuits, cigarettes
	17	salt, spices
Subtotal	67	
Dharan to Dingla	10	cigarettes, biscuits, copybooks, pencils
Subtotal	10	

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RECORD OF PORTERS PASSING THROUGH HILE

September 28, 1975 10 am.-3 pm.

ARUN VALLEY

(eastern tributary)

	No. porters in group	Goods carried
Dharan to Terhathum	3	kerosene
	2	cigarettes, copybooks, spices
	5	biscuits, batteries, pots
	10	oil, shoes, cigarettes
	13	shoes, bangles, pencils
	15	salt, kerosene, oil
	11	salt
	24	salt, cloth, shoes
Subtotal 83		
Dharan to Taplejung	4	salt
	14	salt, biscuits, kerosene candies
	2	cotton thread
	8	salt
	9	salt
	2	chaydar
	1	salt
	15	oil, kerosene, spices, shoes, cloth
	21	salt, cloth, shoes
	18	salt, cloth, shoes, oil
	21	salt, biscuits, kerosene
	21	tea, soap, shoes, cloth
	10	kerosene, cloth, biscuits.
Subtotal 146		
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>452</u>	

The absence of sugar from this list of commodities is conspicuous. We are told there was a shortage of sugar in the Terai beginning a few weeks before this count was made. It was regrettable since demand was high due to the approaching Dasain festivities. It is possible that the large quantities of biscuits in the shipments noted were brought in as a substitute for sugar.

With the extra expenditure stimulated by the Dasain festival, one is tempted to explain what seems to be a large volume of trade indicated by these figures by the increased demands of Dasain. But I was assured both by local businessmen in Chainpur and Hile as well as by the porter contractors that the traffic I noted on September 28 is fairly average throughout the year. My total of 452 porters (a-5 hour count) when multiplied by approximately 2½ times to arrive at the daily volume comes very close to the 1,000 porters per day estimated by the contractors themselves.

The tabulated data should be read together with a map of the region. One will note that just beyond Hile, the road divides, with the Bhojpur, Khandbari, Dingla and Chainpur traffic turning westward to follow the Arun river trail. The goods for Terhathum and Taplejung move along the Milkadanda ridge for some distance before going east. Noting that the number of porters heading to Terhathum and Taplejung totals 229, we know that the traffic leaving Hile divides almost exactly in half to the eastern and western market centres.

We have listed the porters in the groups they were moving and according to their destinations. By keeping the loads ordered in this manner we intend to show two features: one is the movement of porters in groups, the groups in which they were contracted; the other is to indicate their movement to specific markets. On the whole those porters heading to a specific market have been contracted together and remain together over the course of the 4-6 days the trip may require. At Hile, during our tally, we would catch a group resting and waiting for their straggling companions. As soon as all had caught up, they set off again, leaving little time for an interview. The centres they cite as their destinations only sometimes represent the market where their loads will be sold. They are only the points to which these porters have been contracted, and once their loads are deposited there other merchants arrange for the next stage of the journey. But most of the goods reaching the centres listed are sold through their respective shops.

It will be noted that the itemized goods listed are not quantified either by porter load or weight. This table shows the variety of goods distributed among each group of porters travelling together. It is not possible to give the precise number of baskets or weight of each commodity since a single basket may contain an assemblage of several. For example, on top of a sack of salt, one may find packets of biscuits, shoes and thread all tied together. Kerosene is the only product carried separately. This table is not meant to show the tonnage of individual goods. To calculate the precise amount of each product sent into the hills, more accurate figures will be collected from Dharan and Fursay merchants - those are the distribution and loading centres from where the porters leave. At Fursay, only a few kilometers north of Dharan

where the tar road ends and transport must be shifted to porters, there are 22 salt godowns. A survey of their annual or daily turnover will yield an accurate account of the salt trade. Similarly, from the 12 Fursay cloth shops where most of the cloth going north originates, similar quantification may be made. The other products come from a wider distribution of shops in Dharan itself, making quantification a little more complex.

The report is presented as an introduction to the trade economy of the Arun Valley. In compiling this material I hope to provide quantification of the processes described but in addition I seek to draw attention to this powerful and telling transport economy, suggesting that further attention in this area will yield a deeper understanding of the hill economy as well as some direction for later economic developments.

Footnotes

1. I was assisted in this work by Mr. Jangbo Sherpa of Garma.
2. Here I am speaking both of the lower river route which we explored for 2 days and then returned to Chainpur, and the ridge route along the lower part of the Milkadanda. We followed the latter into Hile where we again meet up with the lower route traffic.
3. Almost ever traveller going into the hills is a porter, fully loaded to capacity.
4. About one porter in every 15 is a woman. Of those we asked, all say they are from Taplejung side, speaking a Sherpa dialect. Those we did not speak to were dressed similarly and had the same physical features, so we assume they too are Taplejung women.
5. This was September 28, picked at random, after we had been in Hile for some days.
6. This is mustard oil, for cooking.

