

Amish Raj Mulmi. (2021). *All Roads Lead North: Nepal's Turn to China*. Westland Publications Private Limited.

Nepal and China-related works are appearing intermittently. The recognition and market worth of these works, today, depends on who writes for whom, and in what form. This is true even though, with very few exceptions, most of these works fit into the same category since they embody inadequate and insufficient understanding and analyses of both countries. One more item made an entry to this list: *All Roads Lead North: Nepal's Turn to China*, written by Amish Raj Mulmi.

The author relies on pre-published materials such as political geography, history, anthropology, CIA reports, Wikileaks, and media records. Then he cleverly blends them into his travels to three bordering areas of Nepal and China, but readers have no idea how long his field lasted. Divided into three parts, Part I of the book is about the diversity of the Nepal-China borderlands and their impacts on the border denizens. Part II relies more on the geopolitical readings of the history of Nepal-China ties and Part III contemplates the contemporary realities. In doing so, the book offers an overview of Nepal-China relations, providing tips for journalists, tourists, International Relations students, and borderland studies enthusiasts. While numerous published reviews have already summarized the chapters of Mulmi's book, I am not going to continue it. Instead, I will concentrate my review on identifying the debilitated aspects of the book, centring my critique on the subtleties of the text that Mulmi borrows, relies on, and argues.

As a university teacher, teaching about China, and visiting the country, I have a slightly different take on the book's content and style. Let me begin with the book's blurb: "long view on Nepal's foreign relations as well as the story of China as a global power in the 21st century." Upon a close reading, the book appears to have no connections to Nepal's foreign relations or with China's global power status. While covering three areas of Nepal that border China, i.e., Humla, Mustang, and Rasuwa, and highlighting the presence of Chinese business people in Kathmandu, it seems odd to claim the book as a "long view on Nepal's foreign relations."

Also, I was dumbfounded to read in the blurb, "never-before-told stories about Tibetan guerrilla fighters, failed coup leaders, and trans-Himalayan traders," because the chapters in the book themselves heavily rely on existing literature on these topics. The blurb also claims the book is "part historical study, part journalistic account and all of it rigorously researched," but a closer examination of the text shows the author only as a typical fan of Nepal's history and historiography.

Now allow me to turn to the title of his book, which seems both modish and metaphorical, and at the same time melodious, and marketable. In reality, very few roads lead to the north. Even the average readers may get lost because the book appeared at a time when all roads to China were closed. The author's writing

exudes confidence, implying extensive experience in China, despite not having visited the country himself. By and large, the book is the reiteration of already published works on Nepal and China, offering nothing fresh.

Mulmi brings up the French Indologist Sylvain Levi to claim how Levi escaped from viewing Nepali history through the “Indian lens” and became the first one to use “Tibetan and Chinese sources” (p. xii). Although Levi explored Nepal-related aspects in Tibetan and Chinese sources, how can one dismiss Levi’s dependence on European sources while studying Nepal-related elements? In that sense, Levi does not appear different than the British resident Brian Hodgson. Levi’s prejudices against the knowledge of the Newari scholars, Bajracharyas and Shakyas on Buddhist literature, as discussed in the book *Le Nepal* reveal his Eurocentric and colonial approaches. Ironically, Levi was assisted by Siddhi Harsha Bajracharya in his study of Nepal’s stone inscriptions. Levi’s approach and his understanding of Nepal’s history have been already questioned by the Samsodhan Mandal. To historian Nayaraj Pant, “Understanding Nepal’s history from the lens of Levi offers limited knowledge” (p. 11). Although Levi had a good knowledge of comparative linguistics, he had very little knowledge regarding the grammar, composition, and poetics of the Sanskrit language. In such a state of deficiency, it was difficult for him to understand the Licchavi-era inscriptions written in Sanskrit. Hence, relying on Levi as a point of reference is Mulmi’s major limitation. Not only does the tradition of observing the oriental societies from the perspective of exotica continue in the works of Levi, but also the news reports on the availability of Nepali antiquities in museums and collectors from Europe have already exposed the colonial looting and smuggling of the cultural objects.

Although Mulmi’s first Chapter “Traders on the Silk Road,” is about the Newari merchants to Lhasa, Mulmi did not consider it necessary to explain why he is repeating the same information from the already available writings of Kesar Lall, Prem R. Uprety, Charles Bell, Perceval Landon, Kamal Ratna Tuladhar, Dev Shova Hilker, Tirtha Mishra, Todd Lewis, Chittadhar Hridaya and several others. For instance, it was Deb Shova Hilker who worked on her grandfather, Bhaju Ratna, the renowned Newari trader in Lhasa. It was Kamal Ratna, who worked on his father, Karuna Ratna, another Newari trader. It was Keshar Lall, who employed the folk tales as a medium to chronicle the hardships of Newari traders in Lhasa. Most of Mulmi’s romantic narratives are restaged in a new form, assuming their ideas as his own, resulting in a lack of novelty for readers.

Nonetheless, the way he provided the details in this Chapter is haphazard and lacks authenticity. Towards the end of Chapter One, the author mentions, “In October 1962, PLA [People’s Liberation Army] forces overran Indian positions in Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin” (p. 24), but Mulmi does not engage with the reports like Henderson Brooks on the Sino-Indian war and provides no credible evidence to support Neville Maxwell’s claims of India provoking China. One could argue that Mulmi’s position towards China is evident from the very First Chapter.

He has transcribed his respondent's statements as "If we hadn't left (Tibet) we would have been dead or killed by the Chinese" (p. 17). While numerous existing literature on the arrival of Chinese PLA to Lhasa also mentions the friendly behaviour of Chinese towards Newari traders, Mulmi hasn't peevish into that. Anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista (1980) in his seminal work *Nepalis in Tibet* encapsulates a case:

Chinese officials have always been very generous and reasonable with us. As far as I am concerned, they have pulled me up and have lifted me from the street into my present status (p. 17).

Also, the use of two terms "Nayo" and "Vakil" as alternatives, is a severe case of ignorance from the side of the author. Mulmi writes, "The Nepali resident called "Nayo" or "Vakil" would act both as an adjudicator in disputes between traders" (p. 5). The Newari term "Nayo" was the representative of the King of Kathmandu to Lhasa, whereas it was "Nayak" in Nepali (Mishra, 2003). However, the treaty of Thapathali in 1856 upgraded the status of Nayo to Vakil. As such, how far is it justifiable to use both the terms as alternatives?

In Chapter One, while Mulmi loosely mentions that "most writings on the Lhasa Newars tend to focus on the romanticism of the trade," (p. 18), why he is ignoring those texts that have not romanticized and are instead known for portraying the real-life situations. Authors like Kamal Ratna Tuladhar, Tirtha Mishra, and Kesar Lal are accepted for their efforts to portray the hardships and struggles of the Newari traders. Do texts like *Mimmanahpau* by Chittadhar Hridaya containing the cultural, historical, and social observations of a Newari trader in Tibet, and *Sotala* by Dor Bahadur Bista (1976) portraying the traditional socio-economic relations between Nepal and Tibet, also fall in the same category? Mulmi could have also explored the letter of exchange between the Vakils and Kathmandu to discuss the political and geopolitical dimensions of the trans-Himalayan trade. But, for that, archival research is a must, and if he had done that the claim made by the book's blurb "rigorously researched" would have been justified.

The Second Chapter, "Neither Nepal nor China," is based on the author's field visit to Limi and its bordering areas in Tibet. This Chapter resembles the same thing as one can find in the works of Martin Saxer and Emily T. Yeh. Strangely, a writer like Mulmi seems insensible and immature for not articulating how his works technically differ from anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Melvyn Goldstein, and Martin Saxer. Mulmi's wordage, "from Nepal comes the flag, the rest from China" (p. 26), reminded me of Yeh's 2021 article, "The land belonged to Nepal but the people belonged to Tibet." Mulmi's romanticized impulses are fully visible in this Chapter. Just to bring a few: "Lhasa beer, Chinese Budweiser, Xian cigarettes and baijiu, a Chinese alcohol distilled from sorghum... the people of Limi are not looking to the south, they are turned to the north, towards China...bowls from Limi are known across Tibet" (pp. 25-42). Similarly, Mulmi uses local oral narratives to illustrate the fluidity in the borderland, while

also considering the monolithic lenses of “overlapping sovereignty” (p. 36). This is identical to the findings made by Tina Harris (2013) and Sara B. Shneiderman (2013).

The Third Chapter, “A Fence in the Himalaya” is about the Nepal-China border at Korala of Mustang and its vicinities. Unlike in Humla, the people of Mustang are not permitted to work in Tibet. Just like other chapters, the contents of this Chapter are very similar to the work of French writer Michel Peissel and American anthropologist Carole McGranahan (2010). I am wondering, despite the author’s field visits and being lucky to have a local informant, why is Mulmi completely indifferent towards the activities of the American Himalayan Foundation (AHF) in upper Mustang? Although the territorial border is between Nepal and China, it is the United States that perceptibly operates in Mustang through AHF in the fields of health, education, culture, and religion. How can he miss this while highlighting the role and significance of the physical infrastructure like roads in the borderlands and cultural trade fairs organized by China “unilaterally” (p. 45)?

The Chapter Four, “War and Peace” is about Kerung borders, where Mulmi weaves the details theatrically. He goes back to the Nepal-China War of 1792 in Kerung. But, in doing so, he neither gives any reason for going back to history in the late 18th century, and in a trice, returning to contemporary times, nor uses any unexplored and hidden literature of historical value. He repeats William Kirkpatrick, Ludwig F. Stiller and Vijaya Manandhar. The reader is clueless about whether the author is utilizing historical narratives, enhancing stories, providing context, gaining insight from the past, or simply making comparisons.

In the Fifth Chapter, “Communism Comes by Road” Mulmi raises an important question, “Why China didn’t simply hand K. I. Singh back to Nepal when he first arrived in Tibet? Was he to be a key as Beijing approached Kathmandu to re-establish diplomatic relations?” Despite lifting these intriguing questions, Mulmi missed the opportunity to explore their answers. Again, if he could have done rigorous inquiry into the archives, the book would have been more insightful rather than relying solely on hyperbole. His question may stimulate, excite, and interest the young and energetic readers on geopolitics, but the serious scholars of diplomatic history and historiography may take refuge in the works of Keshar Bahadur K. C. and Bhaveshwar Pangenji to assess the gravity and relevance of the question.

Almost all the CIA reports he has used are easily available on Google. The author lacks a comprehensive analytical discussion of these reports and it is unclear why they are included. Going into the CIA website and browsing Nepal files is a jiffy’s job. But, should serious scholars and researchers blindly trust the CIA report or assess the potential biases and methodology of the reports? Above all, Dewey Clarridge’s book *A Spy for All Seasons* (2002) along with the Nepal chapter inside the book has already revealed the limitations of the CIA officers.

Likewise, the author misinterpreted in making a corollary between the political trajectory of Maoist leader Agni Sapkota in opposition to the construction of the Lhasa-Kathmandu Road, as Sapkota joined the communist movement in the late 1970s, despite the road's opening in 1967. Sapkota and his other contemporaries may have developed a deep admiration for the Chinese Cultural Revolution due to the spread of Mao's Red Book and China Pictorial during Kodari Highway construction. But, Mulmi has not mentioned in which languages they were translated and who did that. The Chinese construction laborers engaged in translating Mao's texts into the Nepali language is a baseless and immature claim. Still Indian Naxalite leaders visiting China to meet Mao through Nepal provided an additional value stimulating the Nepali Marxist leaders and later also emboldening the Nepali Maoist leader to affix Mao's name to their organization and display Mao's pictures on party office walls.

The Chapter Six "Ghosts: Tibetan Exiles in Nepal" is about Tibetan refugees and their discontent. Here too, Mulmi relies on Wikileaks cables to substantiate his opinions. Long before the book was published, the issue of the statelessness of the Tibetan refugees living in Nepal was already raised in the *South Asia State of Minorities Report* prepared by Sudeshna Thapa, Yangchen Dolker Gurung, and Jeevan Baniya in 2019. Likewise, the issue of the socio-religious institutions of the Tibetans taking refuge outside Tibet was also raised in the PhD dissertation of Dr. Ram Chettri in 1990. Why did Mulmi choose to ignore these works utterly?

The Chapter Seven "Between Two Boulders," begins with the portrayal of Nehru's role, not only in shaping Nepal-China ties but also in thwarting the presence of America in Nepal in the early years of the 1950s. As such, in this chapter too, Mulmi only reiterates the fundamental texts on Nepal's diplomatic history with India and China, be it of Leo E. Rose, Vijaya Manandhar, Prem Raman Uprety, Ramakant, John Garver, and numerous letters of exchanges. It is surprising to see the author sporadically referring to the works of A. S. Bhasin but not densely engaging with the important historical documents Bhasin has combined on Nepal's relations with India and China. Bhasin and his works are, however, included at the top of the list of the bibliography placed towards the end of the book. Any student researching the history of Nepal's diplomatic practices in the post-Rana period will routinely recall Werner Levi's article "Nepal in World Politics" and Leo E. Rose's "International Relations: A Root between Two Stones," while going through this chapter because of the similarity in both contents and perspectives.

While Mulmi discusses the episode of Sino-Nepali differences over Mount Everest in the context of border demarcation between Nepal and China, Mulmi simply depends upon B. P. Koirala's *Atmabrittanta*, Ramakant's "The Mount Everest Controversy between Nepal and China" and a CIA report of 1963. Although Mulmi states that B. P. Koirala "attempted a precarious balancing act between the two giant neighbors... and directed at maintaining a neutral foreign policy" (p. 129), the author remains silent about the discussions in India's Lok Sabha

on the “Reported Allegation of the King of Nepal that B. P. Koirala had planned Nepal’s merger with India” on March 27, 1961 (as compiled by Bhasin in Nepal’s relations with India and China documents 1947-1992). Mulmi considers Nepal as “newly assertive” (p. 132) under Mahendra, which is in itself not a fresh realization, however. It was a Panchayati narrative that was later popularized by the publication of an edited volume by S. D. Muni *An Assertive Monarchy* in 1977. Even before Muni, Leo E. Rose popularized Mahendra as the architect of Nepal’s foreign policy in his book *Nepal Strategy for Survival*. He along with his co-author Bhuvan Lal Joshi had dedicated their book *Democratic Innovations in Nepal* to both, King Mahendra and B. P. Koirala.

After 1960, however, Rose’s relations with Mahendra had soured. While Mulmi struggles to delineate the differences between China’s reactions to the Indian blockade of 1989 and 2015 on Nepal, he largely fails to offer robust and sturdy arguments. Instead, he generically argues, “Come 2015...China no longer saw Nepal as being under the Indian umbrella...the road to the north was being widened” (p. 141). On the flip side, Nepal Oil Corporation and China National United Oil Corporation inked a deal in October 2015 (during the time of blockade) to import petroleum products to Nepal. But, China agreed to supply 1.2 million liters of fuel to Nepal on the grant alone and didn’t sell it to the landlocked Nepal. As such, Nepal’s dependency on Indian Oil Corporations continued.

While Mulmi says the road to the north was being widened, how does he perceive the cases of border closures, cartographic disputes, and political and security discourses influencing the cross-border ties? To explain cross-border ties, kinship, culture, and economic exchanges, as well as to highlight the distinctive local realities of each border crossing, the concepts of “fluid borderlands” and “overlapping sovereignty” appear insufficient and inadequate. As such, when you see the road to the north being widened physically in Kerung, you may also see it being narrowed in Mustang, and above all, the factor may not be physical all the time. Thus, be it 1989 or 2015, Beijing perceived the Indian blockade as a strategic opportunity to strengthen its presence and influence in Nepal.

Seeing the reproduction of the news stories published by *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times* from June 25 to July 2, 2019 on the deportation of the Tibetan-American Penpa Tsering, in a dramatic manner in the Chapter Eight, “A Friendship across the Himalayas,” any reviewer may wonder about the way it was outlined. The chapter is nothing more than converting a journalistic news report into sensational hyperbole.

The Chapter Nine “Chinese Capitalism with Nepali Characteristics” examines the entry of Chinese entrepreneurs and contractors into the Nepali market by referring to the cases of Pokhara airport, the Budhi Gandaki hydropower project, and the Hongshi-Shivan partnership. It is fine to rely here on secondary sources like newspaper reports, published interviews, and research reports. Yet, how do you view this issue from your point of view, given that immigrants are typically

found conducting business throughout the world? Instead, Mulmi rhetorically portrays the Xinzhi Bookstore in Kathmandu as his field and begins to weave the narratives on how Chinese entrepreneurs are engaging in Nepal. It is unfair to this bookseller, whether he is aware of this or not, and is simply used as a prop in the play.

Chapter Ten, “All Roads Lead North” is the final Chapter that sheds light on the potentialities and possibilities for Nepal from the presence of China and the Chinese. The increase of Chinese visitors in Nepal, the demand for Yarsagumba, the transformation of Timal village as a result of the market value of Bodhichitta for Chinese, and the growing number of Nepali students in China have all benefited the people of both nations in some way. As Mulmi ends Chapter Ten by stating that “the road to the north has been built; it is now up to Nepal to decide how smooth the ride will be” (p. 210). This may leave the readers wondering, why the author maintained this normativity at the end.

If he is referring to the dearth of required connectivity infrastructure in the borders, Nepal is generally dependent on aid and assistance received from multilateral organizations or any other bilateral support. If he was talking about the dependency of the border inhabitants on China, Mulmi himself has endorsed the perspective of fluid borderlands for Limi. If he was referring to geopolitical sensitivities of the northern borderlands, Mulmi himself has examined those episodes divulging China’s increasing pressure on the Nepali state. The case of the deportation of Penpa Tsering in 2019 and former King Gyanendra’s decision in 2005 to close down the office of the Dalai Lama are themselves a timely example. Hence, Nepal’s decision to determine the smoothness of the ride is conditional. Finally, an “Epilogue” ends the book with the claim that “Nepal is once again in the geostrategic spotlight” (p. 220) which is, nevertheless, not a new dictum, and is a cold-war proposition. Dozens of books have been written with similar conclusions by both Nepalis and non-Nepalis.

Despite all these odds and major shortcomings, one cannot deny the overrating and popularity of the book and the reception it received. Had it been written by any other Nepali authors and published in Nepali, the book would not have gained the traction it did. I applaud the author’s ability to regenerate the pre-published works and the capacity to leverage his networks both inside and outside Nepal. Still, this reviewer is dubious whether the book should be classified as a historical text, a journalistic storytelling, a popular history, a travel story, or something else.

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