Book Review

Simpson, Edward. *Highways to the End of the World: Roads, Roadmen and Power in South Asia.* 352pp. Hurst Publishers 2022.

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This book on roadmen and road building in India and Pakistan by Edward Simpson, Professor of Social Anthropology at SOAS University of London and Director of the South Asia Institute there, is an engaging read. It is a careful analysis of the entanglements of politics, development and road building in South Asia from the perspective of the roadmen, i.e. the actual road builders and the engineers designing roads, but also regional and national politicians, who have built their political capital on the claim to provide development and wealth through infrastructure construction. The main question that guides the analysis is: "Why are so many roads built in South Asia in an era of human-induced climate change?" (p. 1). After having read the book, another question comes to mind, namely: Why are so many roads built if the evidence that they actually do what they promise, for example bring wealth and development, is so thin? There are further important epistemological questions that the author discusses at length and struggles with. One of them pertains to the tensions between the knowledge on roads that social science researchers gather and, on the other hand, the hugely powerful – even if thinly substantiated – discourse that road building is generally good. The other critical challenge that the author has been confronted with relates to the value of knowledge produced by a British social scientist in a post-colonial context of Pakistan and India. As a British scholar, Edward Simpson by arguing that massive road building anywhere in the world is a mistake – considering the carbon footprint of the industry and the carbon footprint of the vehicles moving along the roads – wades up to his waist in post-colonial continuities. Knowing that the British colonial authorities had not been keen on investing in developing the road network in their colonies, how seriously can a British scholar be taken when arguing some decades later for caution when it comes to road building? The book is an honest conversation on these and other topics, and a highly informative read not only for social science scholars but also for roadmen and roadwomen from the region. It is pleasantly jargon-free and full of details that ground the analysis in the local contexts of Pakistan and India, comparing to a certain degree the different pathways that road building took in those two countries after Partition.

The opening Chapter 1 'On the Road' is narrated around the author's journeys along India's State Highway 31 (SH31). We learn about the various political and commercial relations that have run along and have woven around this road in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. As we watch the roadside passing by, the first signs of discord between the dominant story that road building automatically brings wealth and mobility, and the harder reality on the ground begin to show. In Chapter 2, 'Reading Roads', Edward Simpson states that discussing roads with his research participants made clear that 'roads "open up" fundamental questions about the world, how we relate to one another and the future we are building' (p. 30). He was interested to learn 'what people saw when they looked at roads' (ibid.) and to identify the underlying ideas that 'lead to roads being built' (p. 31). For example, where does the powerful idea that roads are good come from, given that the evidence is thin and highly contested? In my own research site in Xinjiang, in northwest China, my research participants in the countryside usually also first stated that roads were good, but then rather quickly differentiated between expressways – which they rarely used because they were expensive, had few exits, and restrictions on which

vehicles could drive on them – and local roads, which they perceived as more useful to themselves. In many parts of the world, we see people turning away from roads because of the pollution and lack of safety that comes along with them. Yet, the general belief that roads are generally good remains. The author explores how this belief has become common sense among the roadmen in South Asia and offers a brief review of Western social science literature on the topic.

The focus of Chapter 3 'Standard Geography' is on introducing three large-scale 'infrastructural formations' (p. 63) that have emerged in South Asia as materialisations of various diplomatic, commercial, nationalist and other agendas. These formations are: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the UN Asian Highway Network and the Indian policy of 'Look East', later renamed as 'Act East'. This chapter shows that today's road initiatives have had their regional predecessors and draws attention to the prolonged presence of globally active companies, particularly American ones, along the roads that crisscross the Subcontinent.

Chapter 4 'Standard Narrative' explores the topic of rural road building in India under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) scheme. It does so by tracing the political and economic actors – such as international consultancies, global development banks and local road-building institutions – that have converged to power this scheme. The chapter also reviews the evidence behind the claims that rural roads bring progress and demonstrates that it remains highly contested. For example, while it seems that road building increases the use of chemical fertilisers in agriculture, other evidence shows that the PMGSY scheme in some places reduced agricultural employment by 10 per cent. None of these developments can be unequivocally stated to be simply 'good'. What becomes clear in the course of the chapter is, however, another underlying idea that the village is a somewhat inferior place when compared to the city. In the narratives on future mobility, village becomes a 'redundant economic unit' (p. 106), a 'waiting room' (ibid.) for industrial markets, and roads become the conduits facilitating outmigration. 'The village largely disappears from the story, as the future is given over to markets and mobility' (p.107).

In Chapter 5 'Gandhi, Nehru and the Royal Road Through the Twentieth Century', the author analyses the theme of the motorway in the scripts of India's two most prominent leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. The discussion shows Gandhi's ambiguous relationship with roads. On the one hand, they are a technology of development, on the other, they bring servitude and challenge village self-sufficiency. For Nehru, roads were 'good to think with' as metaphors but also when asking the fundamental questions about the organisation of a society. By analysing the road imaginaries in the speeches of both leaders, the author traces how the metaphor of the motorway has been ascribed divergent meanings in changing political contexts, and how these meanings changed between the colonial and post-colonial periods.

In the following Chapter 6 'Toyota to Tesla' we learn about how roads in India have been transformed from being a state-managed public good to a commodity in the process of privatisation. By analysing the 5-year plans devised by the Planning Commission between 1950 and 2014, Edward Simpson demonstrates 'huge growth and the gradual commodification of roads and travel' (p. 140). The chapter offers a concise history of the road construction industry in India by tracing the changing guiding priorities and increasing privatisation and liberalisation, the latter two reflecting directly the ideologies embedded in loan conditions offered by global financial institutions such as the Word Bank. In the last part of the chapter, the author turns his focus to Pakistan and demonstrates that it took a different approach to road building – both discursively and in terms of financing – than India, not least because of the direct presence of China.

In Chapter 7 'Emperors on the road', the author focuses on two powerful roadmen/politicians – Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan and Nitin Gadkari in India – considered by the actual road builders to be those who pull the strings and have the decisive power. The chapter shows how the political career of Nawaz Sharif – 'Mr Motorway' – and his political capital have been built on particular road projects such as the Peshawar-Lahore-Karachi motorway. The success of his government for him was directly linked to road building. 'Sharif saw himself as setting in motion the development of Pakistan, and road infrastructure was central to the project' (p. 163). In the second part of this chapter, the lens turns to Nitin Gadkari in India, for whom roads have been a 'shorthand for the performance of politicians and parties' (p. 172). The chapter demonstrates how Gadkari, similarly to Sharif, built his career 'on the promise and delivery of roads' (p. 191), having played a central role in developing the PPP (public-private partnership) model for road building in India.

In the following Chapter 8 'The Borderland's New Roads' we follow the author on his journeys to Pakistan's and India's border regions to witness how roads are not only the stuff of individual political careers, but also convey 'messages about the nation's territory, identity and values' (p. 195). The first journey is through the Kutch District of Gujarat, and the second through eastern Sindh

in Pakistan. Both journeys take the readers to different moments and ideas in the history of the two countries, and their emergence as uneasy neighbours in the period since Partition.

In the following chapter 'Highways to the end of the world', Edward Simpson 'leaves' the Subcontinent to review globally circulating assumptions about roads, mobility and growth. He argues that 'roads and the vehicles that move along them are only one part of a much broader energy-intensive way of organising society and the economy. In this structure, consumption and mobility are the primary goals – they are in many ways forms of each other' (p. 221). While thinking from this global perspective, the author finds himself confronted with the perspectives and ways of knowing anchored in the national agendas represented by the roadmen in both Pakistan and India. The question of how to bring together these two ways of knowing – the knowledge and beliefs of the roadmen on the one hand, and the beliefs and knowledge of social scientists, on the other – remains open. In the last Chapter 10, we land on the ground again, more specifically on the SH31, this time at the toll booths, where 'mobility is converted into cash' (p. 243) and private investors show their muscle. At the toll booths where the revenue *must* be collected, daily work and life is permeated with anger and violence. The economy of the road clashes with local lives, networks and loyalties, as does the road itself by transforming the places along it.

Highways to the End of the World is a great read for practitioners in the road building industry in South Asia and beyond, and for scholars pondering the links between politics, economy, roads, climate change and knowledge-generating practices. Readers interested in the region will learn a great deal about the modern history of Pakistan and India through the lens of road building. As Edward Simpson argues, roads are – perhaps somewhat counterintuitively – a good way to reflect on the broad questions of how the societies should or could be organised, how societies attach value to ideas and objects, and how to bring together national dreams and global concerns.