

Suspended Beliefs

Wire suspension bridges in the Himalayas

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Abstract

In the Himalayas, steel wire suspension bridges hold multiple meanings for diverse social groups. These bridges were built by the British post-1815, for whom intensive road and bridge building was necessitated by the need to protect borders and trade routes to Tibet and the Silk Route beyond.

The bridges, quite often for ensconced social groups in the mountains, are the only physical link to the rest of the world. They also serve ritual functions, especially for transhumant pastoral communities. For tourists and pilgrims, though, more than their utility, suspension wire bridges add to the landscape. For history buffs they are precious heritage. For government works agencies they are but a pain in the neck, for the steel wire suspension bridges, beautiful as they may appear belong to another age. Most have reached fatigue point, are narrow and frail, allowing only a few to cross at a time. Himalayan rivers swell during the Monsoon, their torrents often washing away bridges, severing the critical physical connection, often leading to public outcry for more permanent solutions to the connectivity conundrum. New bridges that can also allow for motor transport are in demand. For the public works' bodies, perhaps, the most convenient solution is to replace them with concrete bridges, that heritage activists feel, severely compromise on the aesthetics.

Wire bridges, thus, increasingly do not fit into the discourses of economic development. Recent natural disasters, like the one at Kedarnath, have not helped the cause of suspension bridges either.

This paper, an ethnographic account of a heritage group's experience of documentation of the bridges, explores the future of these suspended beliefs, giving a community's perspective for whom the steel wire suspension bridge performs a crucial ritual function when their god king crosses over (is physically carried) from one region into another.

Theme: Narratives of bridge construction and destruction