

Chhurpi Connectivity: Himalayan Cheese as Bioregional Frame

Uttam Lal and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman

Chhurpi – the Himalayan cheese as referred to in a range of languages like Nepali, Pahari, Tibetan and Bhutia – signifies food sovereignty for the highland communities of this region. The exceptionally hard chhurpi has long been ubiquitous in cold-arid, alpine and temperate terrain with bare-bones infrastructure and a minimal ecological footprint, situating this foodstuff at a unique intersection of food culture, environmental stewardship and local resilience across the Himalayas. Production of the cheese is an ecologically adaptive response among highland pastoral and nomadic communities who graze yaks, cattle, sheep and goats across highland pastures and passes.

Their physically demanding lifestyle among rugged mountains requires these communities to have reliable sources of locally produced protein. Chhurpi solves the problem of storing milk and of transporting it long distances, and over time the highland communities have adapted their palate to consume milk in this form (Lal and Lepcha 2024). Traditionally, hard chhurpi was a trusted travel companion, serving as an energy-rich snack for nomads, pastoralists and traders during their highland traverses.



Chhurpi being sold at a local stall at Kalimpong bazar in the Eastern Himalayas.

Photo: Uttam Lal, 2025.

The threads that tie chhurpi together, as it hangs in front of numerous shops across the Himalayas, afford us a chance to examine critical questions of highland mobility, connectivity, infrastructures and state-making across the region. We employ the analogy of ‘chhurpi connectivity’ in the face of “pickled infrastructure” (Rahman 2019), where local communities are not able to meaningfully use such connectivity infrastructure such as the roads and bridges laid out by the respective nation-states. Pickled infrastructure and chhurpi connectivity is a metaphor to explain the dynamics of connectivity and infrastructure development across the Himalayas, in relation to how local communities are able or unable to use, absorb, or participate in the decision-making processes that pertain to transformational change in the region. The social and cultural relationships bound up in the production and circulation of chhurpi help to explain the modern developmental landscape of the Himalayas.

As nation-state borders are becoming hardened, traditional hard chhurpi is getting softer. Securitized borders make it difficult for communities to access many high-altitude pastures, leading to scores of people resettling in the lower valleys with better connectivity. Thus, they do not necessarily produce or require hard chhurpi to be carried around and stored easily. The hard bordering practices of nation-states across the high Himalayas resemble the hard-textured yak-milk chhurpi traditionally consumed in these higher reaches. Yet these highland communities are being dispersed to lower altitudes due to the intensification of securitized bordering effects. Now they must navigate, negotiate and chew on these hardened border realities.

Chhurpi, being something of an acquired taste, has undergone a softening of its texture and flavour as it has migrated to lower-lying areas and been adapted to the palate of the milder subtropical Himalayas – a process that is in stark contrast to the nation-state’s increasingly robust bordering practices. The ever-growing sovereignty and security concerns of the Himalayan borderscapes have ushered in more and more restrictions on movement and on the accessing of grazing areas, as well as bans on open grazing in regions like Sikkim, which have forced herders to move away from their traditional pastoral pursuits (Lal 2021).



Imitating how chhurpi itself is made, the hard bordering effects in the Himalayas have led to a lot of churning among Indigenous communities and have desiccated longstanding bioregional/ecoregional connectivity in terms of trans-Himalayan trade, local ecologies and food cultures across the region, of which high-pasture hard chhurpi is an important identifier. As Himalayan yak herders are forced to considerably scale down their herd sizes, this has led to reduced yak-milk production. Thus, in turn we are seeing reduced production of pasture-raised hard cheese. But paradoxically, with the commercial commodification of this special Himalayan foodstuff and an ever-expanding market for it, pasture-grazed yak, goat and sheep chhurpi are fast being replaced by chhurpi made from farm and stall-fed cattle milk of subtropical Himalayas. Recently, farmers in Arunachal Pradesh in northeastern India have innovated to produce chhurpi from the milk of the mithun (*Bos frontalis*), also known as the gayal, a semi-wild bovine which is only partially domesticated, never kept in homestead enclosures and which grazes in the forests around villages.

Freshly made yak chhurpi being smoked-dried inside a herder's hut in Sikkim.

Photo: Uttam Lal, 2018.

The traditional connections as threaded by chhurpi across the Himalayas accentuate the analogy of chhurpi connectivity in a bioregional/ecoregional frame, where Himalayan communities constantly navigate and negotiate multiple nation-state borders and the deployment of border infrastructures. As the herders moved around with a bare minimum of belongings, they used animal hides for storing milk, churning it into butter and cheese, as well as for transporting these across valleys and ridges. Chhurpi, when it is still soft and fresh, is subject to going stale; in order to combat this, chhurpi would be squeezed tightly and dried by hanging them near the hearth or out in the sun. With scarcely any moisture content left after this treatment, the cheese emerged as a much drier and harder mass, suitable for longer-term storage and for being transported across borders and challenging topography. Traditionally, it used to be a major fuel to energize traders, pilgrims and pastoralists treading across pastures and passes.

Harris (2023) contends that trans-Himalayan infrastructures have been built upon and shaped by the imaginary of past connections and historical trade routes, and in this context chhurpi connectivity reflects a pace of regional infrastructure development which is more sensitive to local communities' worldviews and aspirations. Such consideration ought to help emphasize bioregional/ecoregional development aspects, instead of just the narrow nation-state-centric development narratives that are in motion across the Himalayas.

Chhurpi on the shelf of a mall in a Nepal-India border town.

Photo: Uttam Lal, 2025.



Chhurpi is a significant marker of the Himalayan bioregion, food sovereignty, ecological resilience and cultural worldviews. As a Himalayan food product, chhurpi comes from the Himalayan borderlands, which have often been politically marginalised despite being a culturally rich area. Hence, through a bioregional and ecoregional lens, chhurpi transcends its nutritional role, symbolizing ethnic identity, cultural continuity and locavore practices. Its production is embedded within high-altitude agroecological systems characterized by short growing seasons and shallow soil profiles, where conventional forms of agriculture are constrained. In its hard, preserved form, chhurpi functions as an index of ecological adaptation and a durable expression of seasonal food practices intrinsic to Himalayan livelihoods. It is central to the diet of such communities, used in its hard form as well as in softer forms in curries, momos, chutneys and salads.

To the outsider, chhurpi might be seen to have an unusual texture and as somewhat unsophisticated compared to other cured and fermented cheese varieties from around the world, particularly well-known examples from Europe. As an Indigenous food, chhurpi is an important identity marker and an integral part of biological and social life of local communities. Popularly known as Himalayan chewing gum, it is probiotic, high in protein and nutritious (Ghatani and Tamang 2017), and it is primarily meant for human consumption. Nonetheless, supermarkets in the Western world are now marketing chhurpi as Himalayan dog chew, which is proving to be a lucrative business for some local entrepreneurs. Yet this comes as a shock to the cultural sensitivities of Himalayan communities, who consider chhurpi as a food of high cultural value and deeply rooted in their ecological worldviews. Such a development also offers interesting contrasts to the situation where food cultures of the Eastern Himalayan foothills in Northeast India are a surprise to communities further south in the subcontinent, as these include consumption of dog meat and fermented soybeans, considered to be 'tribal' food (Kikon 2018).

When chhurpi travels on a global scale to the supermarkets of the western world as Himalayan dog chew, or when purchased as a curious souvenir by visitors to the region, it is transformed beyond recognition for the social and cultural sensibilities of Himalayan communities. This home-made hard cheese has now turned into a scaled-up modern commercial venture, as opposed to what was once just a pastoral and family occupation. These market and scalar shifts have also wrought subtle changes to its taste and texture. Chhurpi is increasingly being made from cow's milk and is now often softer in texture in order to be relatively palatable and chewable for tourists visiting the Himalayas. It is still perceived and presented as coming straight from the farm and as being culturally rooted; but meanwhile, there are substantial changes happening to its production processes as these evolve from subsistence pastoral origins to being made in bulk quantities industrially in urban settings. These are sold for example as [“Chhurpi for Humans”](#) and [“Chhurpi for Dogs.”](#) While companies like Gorkha Products, Churpi.in and HelloSikkim sell chhurpi online from India, Chhurra Chhurpi has started marketing various flavours of chhurpi online and in retail stores in Nepal. Further, chhurpi has gone international with brands like Himalayan Dog Chew, Yak Chew and Yakies. Such transformations have led to a change in the economics of chhurpi production, and of its demand, supply and circulation; indeed, the high price

of today's chhurpi has gradually taken it out of the reach of most common people inhabiting the Himalayas. What used to be a culturally rooted, ecologically resilient, seasonally produced essential food item traditionally known for its long shelf life, now quickly flies off the shelves of supermarkets in faraway lands.

Chhurpi has always been a hyper-local foodstuff, rather than catering to distant mainstream power centres outside the Himalayas. In light of this, the analogy of chhurpi connectivity also highlights the layers of geographical differences, the existence of "multiple Himalayas" (Sarkar 2023: 218), and the importance of verticality as a spatial perspective in understanding the socioeconomic and cultural organization of communities inhabiting such spaces (van Schendel 2018). There is a lot of chhurpi to chew on while examining how development infrastructure and connectivity are shaped in the Himalayas, all of which profoundly affects the food sovereignty of Indigenous communities.

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Discussion Questions

1. How has chhurpi been ecologically, culturally and economically interconnected?
2. How might you view the analogy of chhurpi connectivity differently from your own understanding of and reading about the Himalaya?

Activity:

Map the transboundary and ecoregional journey of chhurpi from the Himalayan pastures to food store shelves.

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