

Nepalese Borderland Community as State's Partner in Border Protection

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Abstract

Nepal in the current domestic and foreign state of affairs, finds itself at a peculiar threshold concerning national security, particularly with the recent events surrounding border disputes with India. In this regard, the article based on qualitative approaches such as interviews, extensive literature review and the researcher's long-standing experience as a security personnel highlights the strategic importance of the borderland population and argues that these communities are unique in their political position as citizens, particularly in relation to the state's sovereignty. The article in doing so puts the spotlight on the borderland communities who are often overlooked in majority of the literature dealing with the Nepal-India border issues. As global and national experience indicate, the borderland community as allies of the state can be important partners in national security and border protection. Alternatively, the state's dereliction of duty over these strategically important populations will prove detrimental to the state's security, territorial integrity and sovereignty.

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The Nepalese state should, therefore, urgently focus on the borderland community through programs and policies that can help reduce their grievances and build trust with the state.

Introduction

On a mid-summer afternoon in March 2017, the borderland residents of Kargildada-Punarbasa, Kanchanpur were on their way to construct a culvert at Anandabazar. No sooner had they begun the day's work, the security personnel from the other side of the border with substantial strength interrupted the construction and threatened the Nepalese community to immediately stop as they claimed the land where the culvert was being constructed belonged to the Indian side. According to a resident, the land has always belonged to the Nepalese side and these acts were nothing but a blatant attack on Nepal's territorial integrity. The Nepalese community tired of the repetitive interference and towering threats from across the border retaliated with vigour on the fateful day. The retaliation was met with excessive use of force from the other side which, rather than complying with the security force's norm of gradual use of force, immediately opened fire (Informal Interview with MS, 22nd March 2024). Unfettered by the massive demonstration of force, some Nepalese people continued their protest during which a Nepalese resident named Govinda Gautam was killed by Sasastra Seema Bal (SSB) according to an eye witness (Informal Interview with MS, 22nd March 2024). The incident garnered much attention in Nepal and India prompting a high-level engagement of both countries. The Nepalese side commemorated Govinda Gautam's sacrifice by declaring him a Martyr. The Punarbasa community which daily stands to protect Nepal's territory has ironically experienced only little facets of development in the area. This far-off community has been struggling to avail facilities like water, a decent educational system, an accessible market, primary healthcare and even proper roadways.

The Nepalese border communities along the southern plain remain one of the most unique cases of the bordering process in South Asia. The complexities arising from perpetual socio-cultural amalgamation within and across the border and unique politico-economic developments have made the region a ceaseless space of power contestation and negotiation. The borderland communities of Nepal have been the vanguards of the border since the conception of Nepal as a nation (Warner, 2014).

Ironically, they have been questioned for their loyalty fueled by their social-cultural, political and economic proximity towards the people across the border rather than to the centre, and as a result, are often subjected to arbitrary policies and practices that hinder their rights as citizens. The paper based on key informant interviews, the researcher's long-standing personal experience as a security personnel, and an extensive review of secondary literature, builds that these forms of discrimination and negligence could alter the borderland communities' conception of belongingness which might have significant security and territorial implications for the nation. As such, the paper highlights the strategic importance of the borderland population and argues that these populations are unique in their political position as citizens and exercise distinct power concerning the state's sovereignty. The importance of the borderland population as strategic partners in national security is further highlighted given the increasing territorial disputes and distrust with Nepal's powerful southern neighbour. It is thus pertinent that the state urgently design and implement interventions to foster trust and belongingness among the borderland population.

Context

Nepal shares its political borders with India on three sides and China on the North. Nepal shares its longest border in the south with India, which measures 1880 km (Nayak, 2020) of the total 3294 Km of the border area (Shrestha, 2003). Despite the solidification of state boundaries two centuries ago, interconnectedness, interdependence and easy mobility have been a long-standing feature of the Nepal-India border. The open and porous nature of the border has thus allowed "physical boundaries to be ignored as people perceive them as irrelevant in their daily lives and cross them at ease with little, or no, restrictions to transboundary movement" (Newman 2003). Wilson and Donna in Chan & Womack, (2016) argue that borderlands are where state-defined power, history and identity are "continuously negotiated and reinterpreted through the dialectics of everyday life among all people who live at them". Accordingly, the Nepal-India border has been a transitional or fluid space where the rigidity of state boundaries is reconceptualised through the everyday exchange of culture, ideology, kinship, and economic interdependence. The lack of geographic distinctness between the two sides of the border has also

contributed to the blurring of separateness. The mutual dependence of communities on either side of the border was formally acknowledged by the Friendship Treaty of 1950 which permits privileges of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, and easy movement for the population on either side of the open border (Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1950). As much as the treaty recognises the intricated lives of the people on either side of the border, it was also a strategic security move by the Indian government which thought of the open border as an imperial-style frontier to buffer communism from China. Nepal's Rana Prime Minister on the other hand saw the move as a way to get into the good books of the Indian state to continue his grip over the Nepalese state (Thapaliyal, 2022).

The open border has had many implications for both the countries' national policies and practices as well as on the lives of the borderland population living along it. Despite the amiability between the two neighbours, there are many border-related disputes which are significantly featured in the political landscape and the respective security and foreign policies of the two countries in recent years. Reports claim that India has encroached on over 60,000 hectares of land (Diplomat, January 4, 2020) among which Kalapani, Limpiyahura, and Susta stand prominent. The border, despite its porosity and permeability, has periodically seen closures that have questioned the 'intimate relationship' between Nepal and India, significant being the 2015 trade embargo and COVID-19 lockdowns. Added to this are the increasing criminal activities along the border including terrorist activities, illicit trade and smuggling, human trafficking, homicides, cartel networks and other activities that pose a major threat to the national security of both countries. Additionally, porous nature of Nepal- India border and distinct provision it accords to citizens on either side of the border including 'privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature' (Article 7, Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1950) have been increasingly demanded to be revised (Warner, 2014) . There is also great concern regarding the Indian population's demographic and its possibility of infiltration into the Nepalese territory and its implication to Nepalese security precisely in relation to Nepalese citizenship.

Nepal given its poor resources has been struggling to maintain order at the border.

While there are periodic discussions of increasing security at the border, it is unlikely that merely increased conventional securitization will achieve lasting protection and peace at the vast and porous border, complicating threats to national security and sovereignty.

National security as a concept, whose extensive use has been credited to the particular security concerns nations found themselves following the aftermath of World War II (Grizold, 1994) continues to be of much debate. As early as 1973, Vojin Dimitrijevic identified five core elements of national security which included ensuring the existence of the state as a political community, existence of the nation, and the physical survival of its population; protecting territorial integrity as the basic right of the state; maintaining political independence as an attribute of internationally recognized national status of the state; ensuring quality of life; embedding of the vital interests of the state in the national security policy. The concept has since expanded to include in addition to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the physical survival of its population, and political independence- the possibilities for a balanced and rapid social development on an equal footing (Nobilio, 1988), defence, adaptation to global changes (Hewedy, 1981), national interest, strategic national priorities, measures aimed to counter threats (Pynnöniemi, 2018) and capacity of basic functioning of society. As globalization reaches new heights, national security is also inevitably interlinked with international security (Doty 1999; Krause & Williams 1997; Adamson, 2006). As such national security encompasses a diverse array of elements necessary to ensure survival of a modern nation and its sovereignty. In previous works on sovereignty, most definitions refer not to a political community as such, but to the territory over which that community/population exercises control with emphasis on states as territorial configurations (Greenwood, 1991) autonomy and recognition (Biersteker & Cynthia, 1996) the concept also includes legal authority, political power, over the territory Loughlin (2003) As such, the very idea of national security, territorial integrity and sovereignty remain inseparable from border security (Salter, 2012; Chambers, 2015; Chan & Womack, 2016).

Although borders represent the state's sovereignty and power– an important part of state identity– it is here that violation of state control often appears, and local, contingent identities emerge (Chan & Womack, 2016). The borderland community

in Nepal along the southern side are widely overlooked or looked at with suspicion mostly as the population with divided loyalty towards India and is often viewed as ‘un-Nepali’ by actors at the centre (Goodhand & Walton, 2017) owing to their socio-cultural, economic and political ties to Indian communities. The Nepali state in the past has employed discriminatory policies like the requirement of passes and fees for plains dwellers to travel into the hills (Warner, 2014). Madheshis in the Terai have had difficulty accessing citizenship cards in Nepal because they were often pejoratively declared Indians and, thus, disloyal to Nepal (Goodhand & Walton, 2017). Such policies and practices have resulted in discontent and a feeling of exclusion among the marginal population. Consequently, during the Madheshi Andolan of 2007, the Madhesi community articulated an anti-hill sentiment against Nepali-speaking people in Terai who had migrated to the plains in high numbers since the 1950s. The ‘lack of mental demarcation’ with people from the other side of the border together with strained relationships or ‘mental boundary’ (Tripathy, 2019) with the centre places borderland communities in a distinct and vital political position. The strategic political position of the borderland community is critical as their loyalty and sense of belongingness are instrumental to ensuring national security and territorial integrity precisely at sensitive political times as global events and practices have demonstrated.

In her important study, Griecus (2018) discusses how the Russian state justified annexing Crimea by politicizing the identity of the Russian-speaking population of Crimea at a rather sensitive political time in Ukraine. The Russian state gave grounds for its controversial military actions on the pretext of the Right to Protect (R2P) of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine which the Russian state claimed were under threats of genocide and ethnic cleansing under the Ukrainian government. And since no international community or Ukraine was taking measures for the Crimean population’s safety, Russia claimed it had no other alternative but to annex Crimea. The case of Crimea is a reminder that the state’s negligence of its peripheral population specifically in instrumental terms may entangle with other aspects of the population’s identity like ethnicity, language, religion etc. and work as an advantage for other states looking to expand their territory or national interest. A comprehensive understanding of the border and borderland community is pertinent in this regard.

The border study has been dominated by the US-Mexico border and the European borders. Border studies have largely neglected Asia (Chan & Womack, 2016), lesser still South Asia. While in the last two decades, South Asian borderlands have also garnered attention Nepalese borderland study is still in its infancy with a primary focus on a top-down approach to borderlands i.e. view from the state with disputes between Nepal- India border taking centre stage. People/Actor-centric approach to border studies in Nepal has been overtly overlooked. With this background, the study employing a people-centric approach attempts to illuminate the indispensable political position of the borderland community along the Nepal-India border and the urgent need to integrate their instrumental need within the national planning to enable citizens as allies of the state in protecting and strengthening national security and territorial integrity. The paper attempts to understand the strategic political positioning of the borderland community and how it is related to the national security and territorial integrity of Nepal.

Research Methodology

The paper is based on 26 Key Informant Interviews (KII), two Focused Group Discussions (FGD), retrospective reflection of the researcher's long-standing personal experience as a security personnel, and a descriptive review of secondary literature, and attempts to unravel the unique socio-political position of the people at the periphery and its implication to national security. Following recent studies on borderlands that highlight the flexibility and supremacy of qualitative methods to understand the nuances of the bordering process (Wemyss, 2016), the study is qualitative research based on primary and secondary data collected mostly on the border and borderland populations of the south like Dang, Nawalparasi, Sunsari, Kanchanpur, Banke although instances from other borderland are also utilized to complement findings. The cases of Dang, Nawalparasi, Sunsari, Saptari, and Banke are highlighted as the researcher has served as a security officer and Kanchanpur is researcher's home town where he has resided for over two decades which has helped the study garner first-hand experience of the border. KIIs were conducted in all 6 districts whereas FGD was conducted in Dang and Banke as critical issues of national security like citizenship, religious tensions, cross border tensions were more distinct in these areas. Therefore, in addition to KII and FGDs and literature

review, a retrospective reflection has been employed as one of the core data collection methods. In addition to first-hand data, the research has also employed informal interviews to corroborate the reporting of media that have garnered widespread attention. This is anticipated to enhance the quality of the data.

As much as the research has employed data collection and analysis, it focuses on a minuscule aspect of a grand process affecting the state and its citizens on either side of the border. This limits the generalizability of the study in that borderland communities across Nepal do not share the same characteristic features as the borderland communities of the research sites.. However, the study has employed extensive secondary resources on issues related to the core area of concern for the research ranging from local, national and global borders and borderlands. The research deals with sensitive issues concerning law and order.

The remainder of the article is arranged in two sections. The first section presents the major findings of the research with three subsections. The first subsection sheds light on the unique position of the borderland community. It discusses the many challenges and threats they encounter as residents alongside the porous border, and also the distinct interconnectedness and interdependence they share with the population from the other side of the border. The next subsection discusses their role in border protection and the final subsection calls for the state's urgent focus on the borderland population. The subsection also recommends ways in which the Nepalese state can partner with the borderland community to alleviate the grievances of the population and build a more robust security mechanism. The final section concludes the paper.

Finding & Discussion

Borderland Communities Grapple with a Unique set of Challenges, Opportunities and Identities

Border experiences challenges that are unique to the region, prominent of which is the constant fear of external intrusion. There have been countless cases of violation by the public and more alarmingly by their security forces from across the border. Burglary of vehicles, cattle and other household items are common scene for many borderland communities. In Sunsari during the researcher's tenure, cattle,

poultry and vehicle theft were a common occurrence that threatened the livelihood of the mostly impoverished borderland community. People lived with such fear of being robbed that even the rural municipality's website asked people to stay alert (Onlinekhabar, August 25, 2021). Illicit trade smuggling is also a constant feature of the borderland, and unsurprisingly, the easy flow of these illicit items is making the borderland population, especially the Nepalese youth, a constant prey for drug and alcohol addiction (Informal Interview with a media person, Banke, 24th March 2024). A growing number of rehabilitation centres at borderland places like Banke, Kapilvastu, Rautahat, and Saptari are an indication of how the problem of drug and alcohol is taking hold of the Nepalese borderlands. Further, as and when the Indian state bans alcohol, the Indian community enters Nepalese territory to drink which has been known to disturb social cohesion on the Nepalese side (OnlineKhabar, August 25, 2021). There have additionally been countless cases of threats, harassment, and abuse by the Indian population and sometimes security forces (OnlineKhabar, August 25, 2021) mostly concerning land disputes amongst the cross-border populations which have been going on for decades if not centuries.

In a country like Nepal where the state continues to struggle to defend the rights of its people, borderland regions frequently experience higher rates of homicide and human rights abuses than the centre (Goodhand, Myer & Walton, 2019). In Khangra Dang, during an FGD, the locals emotionally recounted cases of brutality from across the border spanning decades. Even to this day and age, Khangra has no provision of electricity, drinking water, functional roads, or proper facilities for education or healthcare. The nearest route to the district headquarters or the nearest market is at least 50-55 Km away and can be reached only by entering 7 Km of the dense Indian forest. In 2022 two Nepali women were raped by Indians while they were trying to cross the forest to reach another Nepali market in Lamahi. The Khangra population depends on the Indian market for even the basics of household supplies where they are often harassed and abused. Taking advantage of the state's poor presence in the borderland community, the Indian population and even the security forces have unleashed several instances of violence against the Nepali border community. The FGD participants shared a particular invasion of the Indian population in Khangra where they entered with machetes, rods and other arms, and physically abused Nepalese men and women. They were allegedly attempting

to scare the borderland community in a bid to displace them from the borderland. Many of the participants were traumatized by the events as a now elderly woman participant recalled in horror with streams of tears running down her cheeks,

“We were chased across those fields, many girls and women were sexually assaulted, men were injured, we had no protection- none at all! We were in no position to protect ourselves. I pray God never makes anyone go through something as terrible as that day”

In Susta where land disputes among the nationals of either side are common, confrontations are frequent and often violent. In a massive display of power over 1,000 Indian villagers backed by the SSB forcibly entered Nepali territory in 2021 and trashed and destroyed sugarcane crops in about 10 hectares of land and also manhandled men and women alike (OnlineKhabar, August 25, 2021). In Kanchanpur, West Nawalparasi, and Darchula, such confrontations relating to land disputes are also regularly reported.

The marginal spaces are also zones of extreme and chronic poverty and are amongst the most neglected areas in terms of government intervention (Goodhand, Myer & Walton, 2019). Quite inadequate efforts have been made by the centre to develop infrastructural facilities such as roads, telecommunications, education, health and other facilities in Nepal-India bordering regions (Jha, 2013). As social analyst Narendra Jung Peter, Banke revealed in an informal interview (March 23, 2024), several borderland populations do not feel the presence of the state other than at the times when they acquire citizenship. For instance in Koilabas, Dang a resident shared that if they have to call a relative in Khabari even 5 Km away from Koilabas, they have to expend Rs 5.50 per minute as Khabari residents are forced to rely on Indian telecommunication whereas calling anywhere else in Nepal is only Rs 0.70 per minute. Electricity, basic healthcare education and even local government offices in these areas are at least 20 km away. Meanwhile, a unique type of cooperation can be observed in a few border areas in the Dang district where some Armed Police Force (APF) Nepal BOPs provide electricity to the Indian security counterpart whereas the Nepali side accesses water from across the border.

The border population is also often a victim of the state’s poor planning and diplomatic

failures. For instance, more than 70% of Rautahat was submerged in the flood of 12-15 August, 2016 threatening the lives and properties of 800000 people when the levees collapsed in places, letting flood waters into the villages and farmlands. The 10m embankment (allegedly hastily increased in height just some days prior by the Indian side) immediately adjacent to the no-man's-land (Dasgaja) on the Indian side acted as a dam and prevented the water outlet. Had the embankment not broken due to water force, the result could have been catastrophic. Despite being informed about the flood, the Nepalese administration, according to the locals, could not be bothered (Nepali Times, 1-7 September 2016). Similar cases were reported in Tilathi, Saptari where an embankment on the Indian side submerged a border village on the Nepalese side. Disasters and crises that the nation as a whole suffers are also experienced differently by the borderland population. For instance, the embargo of 2015 was a major source of anxiety for the borderland population who lived with the constant fear of collision between the dissatisfied parties impeding the flow of vehicles and state security mechanisms trying to open the blockage. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic that halted the lives of the entire nation added unique dimensions to the population at the border who were regularly exposed to commotion of people trying to enter the country but were held by the security and administrative regulations (Shakya, 2020).

Inter-community conflicts are also becoming an increasing feature of the borderland which are often (allegedly) exacerbated and fueled by disturbing elements from the other side of the national border. Places like Banke, Birgunj, and Kapilvastu are increasingly witness to religious conflict which in recent times are allegedly exacerbated if not orchestrated from across the border according to the residents of Banke (Interviews, March 2024). An elderly Muslim politician/activist in Banke shared that recent (2023) Hindu-Muslim conflicts in Nepalgunj saw the involvement of extremist elements from the other side of the border. According to another social observer Prakash Upadhyaya, as borders are always hotspots for migration and easy mobility; political development, ideology and practices from the other side of the border are easily transported into the borderlands which are increasingly reflected in intra-community conflicts in the Nepalese side.

The southern borderland populations have strongly objected to revised citizenship

laws, which they felt were discriminatory (Goodhand and Walton, 2017). There is on the other hand a great concern regarding the the Indian population's demographic and its possibility of infiltration into the Nepalese territory and its implication to Nepalese security precisely in relation to Nepalese citizenship. State's border blindness is further intensified by myopic government policies like the Customs Act (2064). Taxation on these basic goods threatened their livelihood security. This they claim is especially impractical as the Nepalese state has failed to guarantee cheaper prices and better goods inside the border or the means to earn a decent living (Bhatta, 2024). Due to the lack of economic opportunities, many borderland people depend upon informal, or illicit economies (Goodhand, Myer & Walton, 2019). Borderland communities inversely then are looked on as goons, thugs, smugglers and traitors owing to these informal trades. As Amaresh Kumar Singh, Member of Parliament in his speech in Parliament on 19th March 2024 shared

“Borderland communities who are the actual guards of the state are treated harshly in the assumption of theft and illegal import (Chori Paithari). They are routinely harassed and levied heavy taxes even when it is not necessary as in the case of fertilizer which is non-taxable and which ironically the government cannot provide on time.”

The population entering Nepal through customs checkpoints is often also subjected to routine harassment and repeated security checks at atleast 5 points- 2 on the Indian side and 3 on the Nepalese side to ensure taxation and security checks. The repeated checks as the locals complain are impractical and even an unnecessary hassle.

Another important feature of the southern borderland community in Nepal is the overarching regional and linguistic discrimination against them by the people at the centre and hills. Given their socio-cultural and economic similarities and dependence on the community across the border in India, there is a massive ‘othering’ of the southern borderland communities. As much as mounting threats are connected to these places, there are far many cases of interconnectedness between the communities along the southern border. These communities consistently exchange culture, ideologies, political and economic interests, and are not easily distinguishable from each other. The lack of geographical distinctness also adds to the narrowing sense

of separateness of the borderland communities on either side of the border. The border pillars that separate these interdependent communities function more as landmarks to tie their cattle or dry clothes or resting areas rather than a physical mark of separation. Many people have properties and families on both sides of the border and hence are much more concerned and affected by social and political development on either side. This intermixing gives the borderland population a rather fluid or hybrid identity where there is often a lack of psychological boundary with the people from the other side (Chan & Womack, 2016).

On the contrary, there are cultural, linguistic and, to some extent, social distances between the Hill region of Nepal and Madhesh (Tripathy, 2019). The marked similarity and interconnectedness with border communities on the other side of the border have been an excuse for the hilly community and even the state in the past to look at the southern border dwellers with suspicion and distrust. The distance between the state and these borderland people came into full display during the constitution-making process (2007-2015). The trust between the long-neglected borderland and the state was on the verge of collapse resulting in frequent clashes between political rivals and an increase in communal tension between hill-origin people and Madhesis (Reliefweb, July 9, 2007). Despite these movements, the call for widening political representation of the borderlands is yet to see fruition. And yet, the often overlooked population has served as the guards of the border for centuries.

Borderland Communities are Vanguards of the Border

“Yaha basti basauna parcha natra pari ka le (bhuhag) lai jan cha.” (We must establish a community here or else people across the border might encroach)- Border resident from Punarbas, Kanchanpur on why his community resettled from hill to the Terai belt.

The protection of Nepal's border falls under the jurisdiction of the Armed Police Force (APF) Nepal. Throughout the border, there are 253 APF Nepal Border Out Posts (BOP) with 244 along the Indian border. By any measure, the number of BOPs is inadequate to conduct surveillance and maintain peace and security at the vast and often inhospitable borderline. Additionally, the APF was given the

responsibility to secure the borders of Nepal only about 20 years ago. In such a case, the borderland population have been the unofficial guards of the border for centuries. Such vigilance of the border in the absence of an efficient state mechanism has continued to this day. These protections range from surveillance of the border pillar; chasing away land encroachers, poachers, smugglers and criminals; standing up to the harassment of external population and security forces; and disrupting Indian development activities along the border that might have long-term consequences for Nepal, to simply continuing to inhabit the borderland despite adversaries, to keep the foreign intruders at bay.

There is no natural demarcation along the Nepal-India state lines except those separated by rivers like the Mahakali, Mechi, and Narayani rivers. 595 Km of the borderline is a riverine boundary and 1,213 km consists of a land border which is marked by 8553 pillars (Shrestha, 2019). Many of these pillars are at the mercy of seasonal floods and landslides and often go missing or are destroyed by these disasters. As such, the borderland population has been vital in the protection and identification of the pillars although APF Nepal has recently developed GPS for pillar marking.

The Nepalese border community standing up to border encroachment has been one of the major factors in the protection of the Nepalese territory. The borderland community as noted by Warner (2014) were guards since the early days of Nepal as a nation. Realising their strategic importance, the rulers in the past relocated communities along the border side to keep surveillance of the border and tackle any foreign intrusion. As respondents in Banke stated in many of the places like Sainik Gaun, Sanoshree, Jamuni/Danfe, and Futaha in Banke and Bardiya, the then state mechanism resettled retired army officers and common citizens in a bid to ward encroachers from the other side of borders. Even places like Khangra in Dang were established by the Shah rulers to guard against border intrusion. Most of these communities have continued to inhabit these prescribed locations even though most remain immune to the development the central areas enjoy.

In Khangra, Dang the population for much of history has been completely untouched by development but has been silently guarding Nepal's territory. The population along the border has not been able to access even the basics of necessities like

roads, water, electricity, communication, education and healthcare. The population hence heavily relies on the market and opportunities across the border where they are not very welcomed. However, despite the violence and atrocities the Nepalese borderland community continues to inhabit the remote and inaccessible place which offers little to enhance their lives. As an FGD participant suggested, *“will lose no time in claiming that this belongs to them“ We could have left and started our lives elsewhere, but we didn't. This is our land and we must protect it otherwise the neighbours.”*

In Kargildada, Kanchanpur people from upper hills like Mugu, Jumla, Humla, Bajura, and Jajarkot came down to the Terai in search of better lives almost half a century ago. They resettled in the dense jungle area and made it inhabitable. As the community started growing, so did the abuse and threats from the other side. As per the residents in informal conversations, the community across the border wanted to intimidate the Nepalese community enough so they would leave the area making it easier for the Indian communities to utilise the land or even gradually claim it as theirs. Further, as in the case of Khangra, Dang the borderland for much of its history had to depend on the Indian side for basic goods, water and income-generating opportunities and was subjected to routine harassment and abuses. The community people also saw periodic episodes of violent confrontation with the security forces and common citizens from the other side. However, they chose to stay in the hostile area as they believed that if they left the Nepalese land would be occupied and possibly lost to intruders.

In Susta where the land disputes have been going on for decades due to a change in the route of the Narayani river following heavy floods almost 40 years ago, the community is trying hard to reclaim the disputed but rightfully Nepalese land. According to the testimony from the people, the Sugauli treaty stated that the Nepalese territory belonged inwards of the Narayani river however, during the massive flood of July 1954 and 1980 Narayani river changed its course and Susta was left outwards of the river (Shrestha, December 7 2006). The government of Nepal resettled the community inside the Narayani river in Tribeni but people continued to farm their land in Susta. The Indian side however, citing the Sugauli treaty states that the land belongs to India which the Nepalese border community

vehemently deny. In the many confrontations that the borderland communities have had, many have lost lives and left injured. One such inhabitant of the community (Interviewed January 2024) fought against the intruders backed up by the security forces from the other side, resulting in the death of more than half a dozen people on both sides including the Indian security personnel. The respondent who was shot 4 times in the incident and his family continue to live in the area despite continued threats and have no intention of leaving. His act of border protection was made part of a popular movie. The Susta inhabitants have been running a campaign called *Susta Bachau Abhiyan* (Campaign to Save Susta) for over 30 years in hopes of reclaiming Susta.

In 2019, the borderland community along Illam in collaboration with a youth group removed the board kept by the Indian side at an encroached area in Ilam. The territory claimed to be of India as per their current political map is where Nepalese people have lived for ages. Further after the removal the community raised the Nepalese flag asserting that the land truly belonged to Nepal (Tyro News, November 17, 2019). As the dispute over Limpiadhura, Lipulekh, Kalapani and Susta has been a staple of political debate in recent times, the borderland population has been a vital state ally in exerting pressure on the Indian side. Nepalese citizens planted saplings and barricaded the area near the border pillar in Tanakpur as a symbolic act resembling the Indian encroachment of the aforementioned areas (GoNewsIndia, 2021). Rather than an actual act of encroachment, this was a symbolic form of resisting and standing up to Indian encroachment albeit within their limited capacity.

The borderland community has also stood up like a barrier against the bullying of the external security forces. There have been cases of SSB breaching international laws by carrying weapons or entering Nepal without official coordination. On November 29, 2015, 13 SSB personnel came into Nepal, bearing guns under the pretext of looking for criminals. The locals of Kechana in Jhapa who were aware that this was against the security directives and international laws, confronted them and held them accountable. The SSB officers were safely led away from the angry mob by the APF (Online Khabar, August 25, 2021; My Republica, March 15, 2017).

The Indian side adjoining the border has been known to initiate development projects like dams, embankments, high-rise roads etc. without prior consultation with the

Nepalese side which at times are prone to adversely affect Nepalese lives. These dams, embankments and high-rise roads have and will have grave consequences for the Nepalese population. As such the borderland population has routinely stood up to these contraventions. In 2016, the border adjoining Saptari was witness to a Nepali-Indian clash at no man's land after the Nepalese borderland youth damaged a dam constructed illegally by the Indian side which could inundate 12 VDC on the Nepalese side (My Republica, July 28, 2016).

Borderland Communities and their Strategic Political Position

Satthi barsa bhaisakyo lalpurja dinchau ki hamilai Indian Banau [It has been sixty years (that we have inhabited the land) give us land ownership or let us have Indian nationality]- A Demonstration slogan of the borderland community in Dang.

As the border security dynamics worldwide are constantly changing, India as an emerging global economic power has actively reconceptualised its border management strategy. India since its democratic practice has hailed the security of its country integral to its shared border with the Nepalese side. In his speech, the first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru stated 'Broadly speaking, our relations depend not really on any person's goodwill, on Nepal's goodwill; on that government or this government...They depend on geography and history, which cannot easily be done away with' (Kumar, 2016). Such interconnectedness and the porous and fragile nature of the border situates the Nepal-India border as a high-security priority for both countries. Nepal and India are additionally entangled in several border disputes which indicate no gentlemen's compromise in the foreseeable future. Nepal has limited diplomatic strategy and inadequate resources to curb disputes and threats at the border. In such a case, one of the most vital resources the government has in border protection is its population along the vast and complicated border along its territory. However, the Nepalese state must first acknowledge and address the grievances and longstanding mistrust of its bordering citizens.

A careful, much-needed and much-anticipated investment in the often overlooked borderland population has been known to shift the borderland populations' perception, trust and loyalty towards the state as the case of Kuril Island studied by

Richardson (2016) suggests. The study shows that Kuril islanders began to assert their belongingness towards Japan following Japan's generous support to the island in times of desperate economic needs when the Russian state did little to alleviate the suffering of the islanders. However, as the Russian government reverted its interest in the island by introducing multimillion-dollar projects targeted at developing the island as an economically stable site, the islanders also reverted their loyalty and belongingness to Russia. The similarity could be identified in the case of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Gricis (2018) notes that as the economy of Crimea was fleeting, many residents became nostalgic for the 'good old soviet union.' What these studies indicate is what (Sahlins 1989) suggested by stating that the ties of loyalty and identity are strengthened instrumentally by fulfilling the material needs of its citizens. The case of Nepal and its borderland population along the Southern demarcations is eerily similar. Many borderlands as explored earlier have been subjected to little or no intervention from the center for decades. As these areas remain impoverished riddled with underdevelopment, uneven economic opportunities and policies overrun with borderland blindness; the state must promptly address the discontent and grievances of the population at the periphery.

There could be three levels of strategies to address the grievances of the borderland- long-term, mid-term and immediate. A long-term strategy should include interventions of economic growth supported by infrastructure such as roads, electricity, telecommunication, and the provision of healthcare and education programmes which will bridge the gap between the state and its citizens at the margins. These forms of development programs are crucial to curb the growing dissatisfaction of the borderland population who are constantly mocked by the rapid economic and infrastructural development on the other side of the border. Likewise, in the absence of services, borderland populations often fall for illegal and illicit trade. To fight criminal activities and collect taxes, the state must include borderland populations in its welfare and service delivery mechanisms and make them part of the legal trade structures. This could be strategic move to reduce dissatisfaction of borderland communities and incorporate diverse borderland population within the national security system; even the communities who have not yet been exposed to the harsh bordering environment till date which could have prompted their role in border protection within their region.

The mid-term strategy should include partnering with the borderland community on the issues that concern them and the nation as a whole. Border populations as a source of knowledge and trade potential should be assets from a regional as well as national perspective (Weber, 2012). Recognising the strategic location of borderland and exploring the possibility of vibrant cross-border economic opportunities in which borderland communities are integral will provide a substantial sense of belongingness among the borderland population. Borderlines are unique hybrid fluid spaces with their own distinct identity. This important understanding seems lacking in the state's programs and policies and even the mainstream citizens. As a result, many interventions executed exacerbate the centre-periphery tensions- the problems facing state margins are often rooted in policies designed at the centre. Thus, policies such as the Citizenship Act need urgent implementation. This will be a significant step towards building trust among the southern borderland community. Further, the Customs Act which is seen as arbitrary by the borderland community also needs serious deliberation (Bhatta, 2024).

The state should partner with the strategically important borderland population in border protection and cross-border security through initiatives like citizen oversight and cooperation by localizing border management and calling for vigilance by the border population. A soft border approach (Weber, 2012) based on consultation and cooperation between the state and borderland population (Herbert 2020) is key to achieving sustainable security of the border. The partnership between the state and the peripheral community should begin by empowering local communities with vital information about their rights and responsibilities and greater access to security sectors (Ramsbotham & Zartman, 2011). Programs like *Seemabasi Sanga Sasatra Prahari Bal* (The Armed Police Force together with the Borderland Community) are vital in this regard. This important program should be designed to partner with the local community in border protection and other security-related aspects. It must also include routine community outreach programs to raise awareness about the borderland community's rights and responsibilities, and grievance handling mechanisms. The program could also be utilised in contributing to the state's service delivery mechanism in far-off, inhospitable, and inaccessible places by acting as make-shift service outlets for Agro-goods, health care, veterinary, and administrative services within the BOP premises. Apart from making vital services

available to remote and inaccessible areas and making efficient use of the state's scarce resources, this will also help strengthen trust between state mechanisms and the border population.

Another Mid-term strategy could include developing and implementing a Binational cobordering approach which will entail partnering with the security forces, local governments, and civil society of either side, in border protection and management. Despite disputes, India is Nepal's vital ally in the promotion of peace, prosperity and democratic practices. As a former Indian Prime Minister stated

"We can change history but not geography. We can change our friends but not our neighbours."—Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (Chicago Tribune, February 28 1999).

Nepal must therefore strengthen its diplomatic ties with India to settle long-standing border disputes and ensure a collaborative border protection mechanism. A Binational co-bordering approach should include a cross-border council through which local issues such as cross-border trade, schooling, environment, drugs, smuggling, human trafficking, encroachment and waste management, and other general border protection issues could be resolved jointly by the communities themselves in partnership with security forces from both sides. Further as Nepal's security is increasingly tied up to international security well beyond India, an integrated security approach will further strengthened Nepal's national security.

An immediate strategy should include quick-impact projects that prevent disturbances in lives at the border. For instance, taking immediate steps to reduce the hassle and harassment of citizens entering or crossing the border will be of great relief for residents of borderlands who constantly cross the border as part of their daily lives. In place of three security checkpoints, one checkpoint with APF, and a customs representative will reduce the duplication of work for security personnel and discontent for common people from having to stand in queue and constantly open and close belongings and bags brought from the other side. Further in far-off borderlands where there are no checkpoints, a small unit of APF BOP and Customs representatives could ensure easy tax collection and ensure security at the border.

Improving the state's presence at the border and addressing their long-standing

grievances have been known to build citizen trust and a sense of belonging (Richardson, 2016). In the Nepalese case, the borderland communities like Khangra where the state is increasingly investing in developmental projects (albeit painfully slow), the citizens are finally beginning to feel like the citizens of Nepal (FGD participants in Dang). The border protection work of APF in this regard is also greatly appreciated by the borderland communities as the research participants from Sunsari, Dang, and Kanchhanpur suggested. According to them, cross-border crime, border disputes, and intrusions have substantially died down since APF's presence in the region which has made the borderland population feel much safer. Increasing such interventions that have a direct impact on borderland communities' daily lives will further smoothen the relationship with the centre.

Nepal at this crucial juncture in history with shifting security concerns at and within the border needs to act promptly and strategically. The continued waves of neglect of the borderland give way to exploitation and manipulation by separatist and even armed groups as the recent cases in Khangra, Dang and the case of Terai during the insurgency indicate. One of the border villages of Khangra, which has remained cut off from the services of the centre, critically depends on India for basic livelihood necessities. The Indian side, noting the village's heavy reliance on their side and the gross neglect from the Nepalese state towards the borderland community, distributed *Indian Adhar Cards* (Indian Welfare Cards) to the villagers (FGD participants, Dang). This many inhabitants believe is the first step towards 'Indianising' the village population and subsequently could 'Indianise' the village territory.

The Madhesi population's discontent with the state was manipulated by the Maoists during the active insurgency. The Maoists' focus on exclusion and their deployment of identity in politics resonated with Madhesi groups even though the former's anti-Indian rhetoric had little appeal (Goodhand & Walton, 2017). The constitution-making era of the 2000s and the 2010s drew discontent among minority groups, precisely the Madheshi borderland population who felt excluded from the state's governing policies and practices. The discontent culminated in violent mobilization in the form of the 2007 Madhesh Andolan which killed, injured and displaced thousands of people in the Terai belt. Further, the movement is also widely believed

to have been supported by external factors and forces (Goodhand & Walton, 2017).

Global practices and events in Nepal have shown that creating biased and discriminatory citizenship amongst its diverse citizens precisely those at the centre and the periphery inevitably compromises territorial integrity, national security and sovereignty. As more and more communities are drawing attention to the desperate conditions at the border through campaigns such as '*Seema Basi Bachau Abhiyan*' (Campaign to Save the Borderland Communities), the Nepalese state should direct its urgent focus on the borderland community along the borderlines. An inability to do so will invite increasing voices like those of the borderland communities from Khangra during their 3 months long campaign in Lamahi, Dang- "*Nakawasi lai ki Nikas Chaiyo ki Bikash*" (the Borderland should either be annexed (from Nepal) or provided with developmental opportunities).

Conclusion

The Nepalese border along its southern territory has been a fascinating space with the amalgamation of culture, diverse actors, political interests, and unordinary economic activities spanning centuries from both sides. The borderland thus, inhabits communities with fluid and hybrid identities which challenge the rigidity of the state's demarcation of territories. The shared socio-cultural and politico-economic interests of the borderland communities have been much celebrated and acknowledged by both Indian and Nepalese states. However, the similarity and commonality among the people of the vast borderland has often been the cause for much distrust and misconception for the state and the people away from the periphery. Such suspicion and distrust have resulted in overlooking the borderland in terms of development interventions which continue to mar peripheral populations with underdevelopment and poverty, and are additionally subjected to arbitrary policies that undermine their position as citizens of Nepal. Despite the grave negligence, the borderland community has been instrumental in ensuring national security and territorial integrity for centuries. In the absence of a state security mechanism, these communities have at countless times stayed vigilant to land encroachment activities, risen against detrimental development projects from the other side and stood up to the brutalities of the public and security people from across the border. These demonstrated acts of border protection remain vital to national security and must

be channeled and utilized further especially as security challenges at the border continue to mount.

Nepal is grappling with ever-increasing security challenges, particularly at the porous open border it shares with India. The Nepalese state is contemplating tightening the security measures at the borders and increasing the number of BOPs and APF personnel which could alleviate some security tensions at the vital border. However, the conventional securitization of borders alone cannot achieve lasting peace at the border. As such, it is pertinent that the state partners with the borderland population to ensure a robust and sustainable security mechanism. Empowering the border population with knowledge of security issues, their rights and responsibilities and developing citizen oversight and cooperation mechanisms could be key to maintaining law and order at the border. Strengthening diplomatic ties and developing a binational co-bordering approach could also resolve common problems and disputes at the border. However, the state must first begin by acknowledging and addressing the grievances of these strategically important populations. Developing border-specific programs, increasing and improving border area-specific economic activities, and amending controversial bills and policies will help alleviate the grievances of the borderland communities and incorporate diverse borderland population within the national security system, even the communities who have not yet demonstrated border protection within their region.

The non-recognition of the borderland population's strategic political position will increase Nepal's security and territorial woes. On the other hand, addressing the grievances of the bordering community, prioritizing their instrumental needs and interests, and partnering with them in areas of national concern could prove a game changer for the country's national interests.

Border studies are gradually expanding from their initial focus on the descriptive analysis of the location of the lines separating states in the international system to "the study of the dynamics of the bordering process as it impacts society and space" (Newman, 2012). Future studies on the border and borderland community of Nepal should focus on how borders are not merely the state's territory but a 'living space' which are impacted by the state's policies on either side but are nevertheless contested and negotiated by its inhabitants. Border studies on Nepal should also

recognise the “paradoxical character” of borderlands (Baud & Schendel 1997) which in the Nepalese case would help generate a better understanding of the often misunderstood borderland communities.

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