

## DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMACY: LEARNING FROM THE CHINESE AID IN BUILDING A ROAD IN NEPAL

Regmi, Bhawana<sup>11</sup>

### Abstract

*Infrastructures development is the backbone of a country's economy. The developing countries like Nepal have to rely upon foreign assistance for the constructions of its mega projects, which need high investment cost, technology, and capable human resources. On this scenario, China government had assisted Nepal in building the eight lanes wide and ten kilometers long Koteswor to Kalanki section of the ring road. This paper describes how local road beneficiaries in Nepal perceive the construction work based on the Chinese model and their understanding on foreign aid development. The paper is based on a qualitative study with an interpretative case study design. The study has revealed that though the development aid policy of the developed nations is useful to maintain the cordial relations with the other developing nations, but at the same time, the people-centered development should not be undermined under this whole process. The explorations of this research are useful in framing appropriate plans and policies for the governments to orient the foreign aid development as per the needs of a larger section of people.*

**Keywords:** Foreign aid, ring road, aid diplomacy and people-centered development.

### Nepal's Planned Development: From Aid's Perspectives as background

The planned development was initiated in Nepal since 1956. The first plan was an important milestone in welcoming the foreign aid program in the country in the increased scale (National Planning Commission [NPC], 1956). Since then, our country is reeling under the assistantship of rich countries in the name of aid, loan or grant. In the present context, at least 20% of our development annual budget comes in the name of foreign help. With this support, the country has aimed to orient foreign aid towards the economic growth aligning it with the national needs and interests (NPC, 2016). Constitutionally also, it is mentioned that "The Government of Nepal shall have the power to obtain foreign assistance and borrow loans. Such assistance or loans shall be so obtained or borrowed as to have macro-economic stability of the country" (New Constitution of Nepal, 2015, p. 45).

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11 Regmi is Socio-economic Expert, Api Eco Consultancy and Research Private Limited at Babarmahal-11, Kathmandu, may be contacted at: regmeebhawana@gmail.com

Globally, the essence of collateral development is under practice, which is helping to uplift the development countries. The United Nations body had implemented the Millennium development goals in the period of 2000 to 2015. Out of eight different goals, the last one was to strengthen the global partnership for development (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2019a). Likewise, the declaration of sustainable development goals in 2015 has become supportive to the least developed countries for getting support from the well-off nations. On its goal 17, the United Nations has stated to, "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development" (UNDP, 2019b). This comprises the support in the sectors of finance, technology, capacity building, trade and systematic issues to the third world nations. Moreover, the government's report in Nepal shows that in the last 15 years, the foreign assistance in the forms of grants, loans or technical assistance has nearly tripled. However, it also claims that Nepal deficits the sufficient financial and technical knowhow efficiencies for constructing large-scale infrastructure related projects (NPC, 2017).

China is one of the nearest and helpful neighbors of Nepal. It has been assisting Nepal in various development projects. In 2011, it had agreed to widen the longest ring road in Nepal, which is 27 Km in total and was double lane only. Construction activities have begun 5 years ago. This construction has raised the hope of solving the traffic problem in the city where more than 3.5 million people are residing. For the implementation, the Chinese government had hired an engineering consultant to do the technical survey from the same country, named Third railway survey and design institute. The major construction activities planned were as, "widening the road to eight lanes with two bicycle lanes and pedestrians' pathway, bus station, parking lots, maintenance of the main road-stream bridges, construction of one simple urban fly over and three pedestrian overpasses" (Chinaaid, 2017, Para 1). The implementing agency was Shanghai Construction Group Company Limited from China (Sharma, 2016). Recently, the construction of an important 10 kilometer (Km) section of the road from Koteswor to Kalanki is finished and has been handed over to the Nepal Government by the Chinese officials. It took almost five years and was building on the grant assistance of 5 billion of Chinese government (Spotlight, 2019).

### **Problem Statement**

#### **A 10 Km Road with Just 3 Overhead Bridges and 4 Zebra Crossings:**

In this present scenario, the Nepal Government has even shown gratitude towards Chinese people for assisting to build such macro-level infrastructure (New Spotlight Online, 2019). Even the Chinese authorities are claiming that the improved road will bring the social, economic and environmental progress in the lives of Nepalese living at Kathmandu valley (Xinhua, 2019).

To our dismay, the number of deaths and fatal accidents has increased on this section of road. Social activists blame for the people unfriendly road infrastructure as the main cause for this (Ojha, 2019). Retired traffic police officer, Hachhethu (2019) claims that the 8-lane road seems to be beautiful, equipped with facilities and modern in the context of Nepal, however, it is very dangerous to the road users. He claims that, in the completely 10 Km, 8-lane road, there are no traffic lights, only 4 zebra crossings, 3 overhead bridges, no cycle lanes, and no CCTVs tracking. Due to these, the road has become unsafe to the pedestrians and fatal accidents have tremendously increased.

It seems that the governments in the two countries are having top-down perceptions towards the built road. Even it could be analyzed that the notion of the Nepal government is aligned with the modernization theory, which believes that the developed infrastructural development will promote urbanization, and ultimately leads towards the development (Crossman, 2019). The Chinese companies did the design of the road and the construction. The role of Nepalese authorities was not crucial as they were receiving the large grant along with the technical support of China. Of course, the support from such a huge economic giant towards its poor neighboring fellow is praiseworthy. Despite these, the common people who use the road several times a day are not feeling safe by this model of development. They are losing their lives because of no enough zebra crossings or overhead bridges. In this discourse, the voices of the road users are really missed. How do they feel about foreign aid development in building the road, which they use daily? What changes the improved ring road has brought into their lives? Are there any socio-cultural feelings represented in these types of development? Thus, this research aimed to explore the perceptions of the capital city dwellers towards the ring road built, under the assistance of China.

## **Research Methodology**

### **An Interpretive Case Study Approach**

A complete 10 Km section ring road from Koteshowr to Kalanki, built by the China government and recently handed over to the Nepal government was taken as the case in this research. The road users like school going students, senior citizens, traffic officials etc. were considered as the unit of analysis. Their views were carefully listened; activities were persistently observed and interpreted to make the meaning of this study. In addition, I did desk research too by reading the various published reports and newspaper articles. Thus, I chose the interpretative case study design to conduct this research. Moreover, Yin (2011) has said that case study method is quite relevant in studying the contemporary issues by the application of more than one methods to gather the evidence like "direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved

in the event"(p. 12). The need for this study method is usually felt when "phenomenon and the context are not always sharply distinguishable in the real-world situation" (p. 17). Therefore, this method seemed to be appropriate in this research.

For the information collection, I did observation methods of the traffic movements and road crossings by the pedestrians in four different sections of the road: Mahalaxmasthan, Talchikhel, Chapagaun *chowk* - Junction of a road section and Satdobato. I frequently visited the sites and interacted with the people there. I selected participants through judgmental sampling procedure. I interacted with six people, did in-depth interviews, listened to their stories and interpreted them with the help of the theories, and self-reflection. The meanings are aligned with the purpose and are informed by the theory of development diplomacy.

### **Theorizing the Discussion: Development Diplomacy Theory**

These days, helping the poor nations by the prosperous ones has become an important part of maintaining good bilateral relations as well. This has helped to make the kind and helpful image of the donor countries abroad and supporting the development activities of the needy nations (Zielinska, 2016). Further the literature points that it is "often based on non-material resources that a donor state has to offer, such as knowledge and know-how: achievements and discoveries in science, technologies, environment, health, political system, social life, and so on" (p. 15). It is aligned with the concept that the aid transfers help to maintain the cordial relations between the donor and the recipient states and enhances the donor's influences and promoting its public diplomacy.

China and India are the two growing economic giants of South Asia and both the countries enclosed Nepal between them. Nepal is one of the least developed countries in the world. Both the neighboring countries are providing support to Nepal in different mega projects like international roads, railway connectivity, making hydropower dams and so on, which are aimed at achieving the "overarching national goal of poverty reduction" here and to upgrade the country's status from the "least developed to developing country by 2022" (GoN, 2002, p. 13; GoN, 2014, p. 1). This help could be viewed as part of development diplomacy among the nations to show their own strength and influence in the region. With the use of this theory, the following thematic interpretations have been made by collecting field information through observations and unstructured interviews of the road users of Koteswor-Kalanki road in Nepal.

### **Discussions:**

### **Marvelous Example of Development- The Chinese Ring Road**

Koteswor -Suryabinayek road the first sixth lane road in Nepal, built by Japan government in 2011 (JICA Nepal Office, 2011) was one of the finest examples of road development in Nepal. After that, the recent achievement in the road improvement in Kathmandu is the Koteswor-Kalanki Section. Most of the peoples are quite satisfied with the support of our neighboring China, investing billions of rupees to develop the road sector herein. During my interaction with old aged gentle man at Satdobato said that;

*Earlier there used to be a large number of ditches in the middle of the roads, which used to disturb the traffic and was the cause of accidents. Now, if we observe the road, we feel like living in a heavenly world. There is no traffic jam. The road has widened. A number of public buses, equipped with advanced facilities have been added. The vehicles flowing like the insects are moving without any disturbances.*

Of course, the easy flow of the vehicles was observable. The interviewed day was a rainy day and the drain system there was properly functioning. No, any vehicle was blowing the horn, which is also considered as against violating the traffic rule here (Ojha, 2017). I could observe the big and branded buses plying on the road. Certain areas were allocated for the public vehicles to drop and receive the passengers. The traffic management was quite systematic. Then, I inquired another person was who has been recently migrated to Kathmandu from Eastern Nepal. He expressed that;

*I am building a new house here. I see many opportunities and facilities at Kathmandu. This road had eased the lives here. The road is wide and clean. Earlier, a vehicle had to stand for more than 2 hours of the traffic jam. However, this scenario has totally changed at present. No, any vehicle has to wait in jam even for 10 minutes longer. I hope this road will remain functional and clean because people now days are aware. Even, you can see there are no electric wires above the road. I have heard that in many sections of this road, an airplane even can land in the case of emergencies. In addition, you can see the overhead bridge is being built there (near Satdobato crossing). This will help the pedestrians.*

The optimistic view of that young person was signifying that the migrated, young and educated peoples are contented with the advance model of development. They believe that this type of imported model of change in developing countries can only bring substantive changes in the lives of the common people. They hope that the road structure will be people friendly by their own government's effort in the days ahead.

### **New Model of Development: Old Road Management Systems**

The newly build road section of Ring road is an advanced model of development in Nepal as the eight-lane roads are quite rare here. Likewise, the Kathmandu valley has the highest population density than other regions in the country (Government of Nepal, 2012b). The construction of such a wide road, connecting the major places in the city will definitely contribute to making the city lives better. However, there exist still traditional road management systems on the new roads, which need urgent improvement.

### **Traffic Police for Vehicles Management Only**

The road users can be categorized as vehicle users such as public, private, emergency and the pedestrians. In Kathmandu valley, around 40% of the people are pedestrians (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2012a). In most of the busy junctions, we can find at least a traffic police officer, working in pressure to make the easy flow of the vehicles. In contrast, they do not give priority in the pedestrians' movement, who are crossing the roads. I witnessed an old woman even found quite hard to cross the road even through zebra crossing at Satdobato. Her hand was tightly held by a young lady. Both of them were frequently looking at the eye of traffic personnel, standing at the middle of the road, who was swinging his hands as the signals to the vehicles. However, the officer never looked at them, neither the fast moving vehicles were kind to let the two women to cross the road. After standing for nearly 4 minutes, they succeeded to cross it. In same connection, my participant an old aged woman shared that;

*The traffic officers are here for the vehicles only. They are not taking care of walking people. If my daughter-in-law had not accompanied me, I would have never crossed the road. It is very dangerous to cross this road even along the zebra crossing.*

The feelings of the old woman are pointed towards the unsecured, environment by the senior citizens while crossing the road. If the road is widened, the road should be friendlier to every category of people who use it. Moreover, Satdobato is one of the busiest *Chowks* in Lalitpur, without the traffic lights. Therefore, the traffic police should keep eyes on the safety of the pedestrians crossing the roads through the zebra crossings. The case was more severe at Mahalaxmi *Chowk* and Talchikhel. There are neither zebra crossings nor the traffic lights till the researched date (March 4, 2019). Even the two different middle lanes were indistinguishable. The road crossers could not immediately judge the directions of the vehicles approaching them. These have become the causes for the road accidents.

### **Consequences in every Evening**

A police officer should be always ready for his/her duty. The police manual in Nepal also claims that "holiday is not the right of police personnel"(GoN, 2014, p .110). This signifies how important, the duty of police personnel is. However, the traffic police at Kathmandu cannot be seen on the road usually after 8:00 pm until the next morning. A 10 Km road, where there are only 4 zebra crossings, 3 overhead bridges, no any traffic lights, streetlights, and traffic personnel in the nighttime, has become a nightmare to the most of the road users. On the date of observation at Mahalaxmi *Chowk*, February 7, 2019, no any officer was seen on the road until 8:52 Am. It was a rainy morning and unfortunately, most of the students were returning home from the schools, after getting the news of the schools' closure due to an educational strike by one of the political parties here. Suddenly an accident happened on the southern junction of the road. A car on high speed hit the taxi, which was crossing the road. The two drivers started discussing with each other on the road. The quarreling on the middle of the road continued for some minutes. The outer track was blocked and a half-kilometer long jam of the vehicles could be seen on the road. After few minutes, a traffic officer arrived at the scene. I was observing and listening to their discussion, which began as:

*Taxi driver: (Seeing at the Traffic officer) Look, sir! The car driver has hit me from the side. He should repair my damaged window.*

*Car driver: No sir. It is his mistake. Look, he has scratched my number plate. You should give me money so that I could fix the new one.*

The police personnel listened to the discussion carefully. He tactfully showed the mistakes of both parties. It took half an hour for him to solve it. Both the parties agreed to repair their own damaged parts by self and left the scene. However, in the meantime, the traffic officer was unaware of the traffic management of the *Chowk*, which was interrupted for nearly 40 minutes. Thank god! everything was going on good there. This could be sensed in multiple ways. Single traffic deployed to look after the traffic management in a busy *Chowk* has to concentrate on solving the road disputes occurred in front of them. In the incident, the officer was arrived at the scene lately and he was focused totally on solving the problem. He did not stare for a single time, whether the other vehicles are moving normally or not. We can think, what will happen where there are no traffics in the road during the night times, if such accidents happen then? Who will solve the case immediately? Who will catch the perpetrators of hit and run cases? The absence of the traffic personals in the road in the early morning has become suffering to the pedestrians. This view can be supported by a view of a tenth-grade student, studying at one of the schools at Lagankhel

happily said that;

*Every morning I cross this road to go to school from 8.30 to 8.45 Am. But I never see traffic at this Mahalaxmi chowk during that time. However, I do not worry about it as I have already become habituated on it. It has already crossed three years since I have been using this road. I cross the road by raising hands like traffic, as there is no zebra crossing here. However, I would be happy and feel safe if there was an overhead bridge here.*

The traffic deployment system is the same in the new ring road built by the China government as it was during its two-lane status before the construction. The people who walk along the road daily have seen the physical change but could not feel it due to the similar road management system. For instance, same traffic deployment timing, focus of the traffic police in the vehicles only, not the pedestrians and the traffic police more concentrated on punishing the perpetrators or solving the road disputes than looking after the other vehicles safe flow at the meantime have not contributed in bringing significant changes in the lives of the road users. People are expecting the change, which makes their lives comfortable and safe.

### **Settlements Divided: Feelings Broken**

The political division map of Lalitpur Metropolitan city illustrates that the city is divided into 29 different wards. The map even informs that from Koteswor to Balkhu section, ward nos. 9, 7, 17, 15, 14, 13, 4, 3 and 2 are physically divided by the Koteswor - Kalanki section of the ring road (Lalitpur Metropolitan City, 2019). It is true that this division was made earlier than the expansion of the ring road, but the enlarged sections, without sufficient zebra crossings or overhead bridges, have made difficult in traveling within the same ward. An elected representative of ward no. 14 said that the ward no. 14 office building is outside the ring road and more than 100 houses are inside the road. The people habituating inside the road suffer a lot to come and receive the administrative services from their own ward office due to the unsafe road structure (S. Khanal, personal communication, February 26, 2019). This narration signifies that either the road movement needs to be made safer or the political boundaries should be relocated. The later one is quite impossible to achieve. The simplest one could be following the former one by constructing the zebra crossings at every busy section of the road, where a single ward has been divided into two portions.

### **Physical Development Verses Socio-Cultural Context**



While crossing the road at Mahalaxi chowk, I even experienced that a person has to rotate his/her head for 4 times, while crossing the road for the safe crossing. The small students have to swing both hands to give the signal to the approaching vehicle so that it can lower its speed. An old woman cannot cross the road alone. She needs the help of others while going from one end to another. A mother, carrying a small baby on her back has to wait for several minutes to cross the road safely. As most of the good schools, hospitals, government offices, job places are confined inside the ring road; the people living in the outskirts of the core city have to travel along it or by crossing it daily. They feel that the movement is not safe due to over speed at the 8-lane ring road and the unavailability of zebra crossings and overhead bridges near the compact settlements. Even, it could be observed that in the whole section of the road there are only three public toilets at Koteswor, Gwarkho and Kalanki and all are presented on the southern section only. Unfortunately, an old cobbler, who used to earn money by sewing the shoes and collecting the service charge from the temporary public toilet at the Mahalaxmi *chowk* is no more seen these days after the displacement of the toilet there due to the road expansion. The *chowk*, without a public toilet, is one of the busiest public gathering places in the Lalitpur district, which can be witnessed during the morning time, where hundreds of construction labors and contractors meet before departing for the work. These social issues have been neglected during the design of the road.

I even witnessed one impact of the widened road in cultural practices of the city dwellers. It was February 5, 2019. People were celebrating Madhav - Narayan Festival as per the Hindu ritual on that day. "During the festival, the idol of Madhav Narayan is paraded from Sankhu of Kathmandu to Panauti of Kavre via Triveni Ghat, Changu Narayan, Pashupati, Pharping Shesh Narayan and back to Sankhu on foot during which devotees sit down and listen to the age-old Swasthani Brata Katha and conduct a fast for the entire month" (Adhikari, 2018). The devotees had to cross the Malaxmi *Chowk* of the ring road to return back to Sankhu after worshipping Shesh Narayan god at Pharping. The volunteer deployed at the *Chowk* there was saying that around 215 devotees were traveling the route on that day and 25 volunteers were in total to assist them. The devotees walked in separate groups due to varied age groups and physical abilities. I was curious about their traveling and witnessing, whether the road had eased their movements or made it further hard. After waiting for nearly an hour, a group of three devotees arrived there. An old woman in her 70s followed them in red dressed and bare feet. The volunteer received the former group and told all of them to gather at one place at first. They did so and he accompanied them to cross the road. He used hands to stop the vehicles. The traffic police standing on either side of the road even helped them to cross the road by blowing the whistle. The volunteer said that;

*This is our great festival our management team also wrote request letters for the security of our god's statue and the worshippers. That is why traffic police are also cooperating us.*

After the safe crossing of that group, the volunteer also left the scene. It was around 3:15 Pm, and then it was the duty of the deployed traffic officer to help the devotees. However, he was also alone and his primary duty was to assist the vehicles in their regular passage. I was continuously observing the scene. After a few minute, a women devotee of aged, probably 40 arrived there to cross the road. On the empty stomach from last one day, on the bare feet and with blurred vision, it was quite difficult for her to cross the road. Finally, she succeeded to cross the road section by taking help of other pedestrians without touching them, as it is believed that the devotees should not touch other non-devotees and even should not speak up with the people belonging the so-called lower caste group.

As my information-gaining process continued, I further got a chance to observe the activity of another group, which was assisting a sick woman, being carried on the arms by the three scout volunteers. As they approached near the main road of the *chowk*, they were nearly hit by a small load-carrying vehicle from the front. The scout members became angry with the driver, shouted at him and requested him to show at least a bit of humanity by lowering the speed in the case of emergencies. The driver was also arguing that they should walk from the edge of the road and should be aware of the vehicles coming to their front. The discussion ended as so as the condition of the woman was not good and the devotees were in hurry. Now it was their turn to cross the huge road in a busy traffic. The alone traffic police personnel was busy somewhere. Finally, with difficulty, three of them escorted the sick devotee woman carefully.

Even I witnessed most of the devotees were crossing the road by shaking hands in the air and after the vehicles were stopped they used to run fast to cross the wide section of the road with bare feet, empty stomach. Interestingly, upon inquiry with the deployed volunteers, they still believe that the godly power protects them and energizes them. I was thinking that if there were zebra crossing to cross the road or enough numbers of traffic lights the devotees would not suffer much. In addition, the traffic personal need not have to concentrate on the devotees only, a large number of volunteers need not have to be deployed, the quarreling between the scouts who were escorting the sick devotee and the rugged driver would not have happened, if there was minimum road safety measures. The frightened face of the devotees crossing the road was indicating that the physical road and the road management system were not pro towards their cultural practices, which they have been following since from generations.

### **Development Aid as Diplomacy: Keeping People in the Center**

Of course, it is necessary for developing countries the receiving of development aid is the key to achieve their quick progress. Most of the countries take the aid as the tool of strengthening the ties with the fellow countries. It is also termed as development diplomacy. Amazingly, westerners believe that China has been using the foreign aid tool to maintain contact and relationship with non-communist countries since from a long period in history (Poole, 1966). However, the scenario might have changed in the current context. Recently, the Chinese ambassador to Kathmandu, Ms. Hou said that the Nepal-China relationship is unique as rivers, hills, and mountains connect both geographically. She pointed out that China does not have a vested interest in investing in developing activities here. She further said that the investments here are to support the development needs of the government and the supports are not aimed at increasing the Chinese influence here (Ghoraine, 2019).

Meanwhile, the diplomacy used to be meant as a focus on non-material support, but the case of China-Nepal relationship is peculiar. One of the examples is the Koteswor- Kalanki road section. Here, China not only granted money to build the road but also deployed its own designing consultancy and a construction company to make this happened. Nepal government has already received its ownership. To our dismay, besides its beneficial uses in reducing the traffic jams, many criticisms have erupted from the road users' perspectives regarding the safety measures of the road. People believe that the new road system should also have new management as well as should not ignore the socio-cultural values of the people benefitting from the development.

In fact, any physical infrastructure should have respect in the social and cultural context. If not, it might affect the way of living there. Chambers (1983) claims that "Outsiders are hindered from appreciating and learning from rural/local people's knowledge by many forces. Besides power, professionalism, prestige, lack of contact, problems of language and sheer prejudice, another factor is the gap between practitioner and academic culture" (p. 83). Due to these, development practices could not become people-centric in developing countries.

### **Conclusion**

The notion of foreign aid diplomacy between the country's representatives should further encompass the local views as well. In the changed perspectives of Nepal, the local government can play an influential role in the representation of the voice of the people living there. Likewise, there should be a rigorous public discussion about the aid, which should be facilitated by the NGOs, academia, and Medias. With these, the aware people can even assist the donor country

to implement its plan with the feeling of their ownership and responsibilities as well. Besides the political implications, the donors should have a realization that they are just assisting the recipient country through the aid (Seo, 2017). Thus, the foreign aid diplomacy show should not be limited within the countries' bureaucratic and political chaos. Rather, it should recognize the local beneficiaries as an important stake, which can further help in strengthening the ties between the two nations. Finally, yet importantly, if the road movements are not safe, many innocents will be either lose their lives or become handicaps due to the wrong borrowed designs of the development in developing countries.

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