

India, Nepal and the lives on the ground

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Nepalese counterpart KP Sharma Oli. (AP Photo)

For age-old neighbours India and Nepal, the border was formally demarcated for the first time with the Treaty of Sugauli (1816). The original treaty drafted by the British East India company called for a “fluid border”. Thus, when the region was delineated, the boundaries were not based on physical landmarks but on rivulets, which have since then considerably changed their courses. The current bone of contention – Kalapani — lies in this ill-defined region. This issue returned to the forefront when the Government of India released its revised map of India in November 2019. The new map, in addition to the other changes, continued India’s claims to the Kalapani region as a part of the Pithoragarh district in Uttarakhand. This publication was swiftly denounced by the Nepali officials. And in 2020, the Nepal government led by [K P Sharma Oli](#) introduced a constitutional amendment which made changes to the Nepali map. The new map claimed the Kalapani region as a part of the Dharchula district in Nepal. The update also claimed the Lipulekh pass and the area of Limpiyadhura for Nepal.

The tri-junction of Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh carries immense geostrategic significance for India as it serves as a vantage point to keep track of Chinese movements. Thus, the constitutional amendment made by Nepal raised flags for the Indian government and signalled the start of a formal rift in diplomatic relations.

The contemporary interactions and diplomacy of these neighbouring countries are guided by the Indo-Nepalese Friendship Treaty, which was signed in 1950. The treaty had opened up the borders and allowed citizens of both the countries, especially the ones residing on the fringes, to inter-marry and conduct cross-border trades or jobs. Despite having its fair share of critics, the treaty did improve relations between both the countries, leading to the emergence of a unique “roti-beti relationship”.

Perhaps it was a testimony to this cordial relationship that India's military stronghold in the region went unopposed by Nepal for years. As it has been well documented, in 1951, as a response to the Chinese invasion of Tibet, India had constructed several military outposts around the now-disputed territory of Lipulekh pass. Additionally, in 1962, India had increased its military presence across this frontier in light of the Sino-Indian war. And post the 1962 war, this area has been under the aegis of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. Political scientist [Leo E Rose](#) notes in his essay 'Nepal and Bhutan in 1998: Two Himalayan kingdoms' that "Nepal virtually ignored the Kalapani issue from 1961 to 1997, but for domestic political reasons it became a convenient India-Nepal controversy in 1998". And it is the opinion of several political experts that a similar route is being taken by the Oli to distract the masses from internal political challenges, and to unify the party and the country against a "common enemy".

Despite not being hostile, the relationship between India and Nepal cannot be labelled as amicable. Their growing differences have been exacerbated by several recent incidents — the India-China agreement in 2015 under which India and China (without consulting Nepal) decided to increase trade through the disputed Lipulekh pass; India's response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake which may have inadvertently amplified the subsequent humanitarian crisis; the duality of India's stand on the Madhesi movement, and the Nepal Citizen Amendment Act, which has several unpopular clauses like the provision of Nepali citizenship to Indians after seven years of marriage to a Nepali citizen.

This article neither aims nor attempts to explain the plethora of reasons that contribute to the growing tensions between the neighbours. What it simply seeks to explore is the ramifications of the laws and policies which arise, as a by-product of these tensions, on the fringe communities that reside in these areas of conflict.

Some of the local inhabitants of this region, which falls in the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, are tribal communities like the Johaari, Darmi and Bhotia. These communities practice combined mountain agriculture — practicing animal husbandry and pastoralism, while simultaneously cultivating crops like millets, cabbage and potatoes. However, their income for agriculture was traditionally secondary, and it was the flourishing trans-Himalayan trade they conducted with Tibet that sustained them. Bhotia traders exchanged their woollen products, sugar and grains with borax, raw wool, salt and animals from Tibet.

Gerwin and Bergmann (2012) explained that the British saw the Bhotias as a means of expanding colonial influence into Central Asia. For this purpose, these traders were also taxed less. However, as the search for a scientific frontier for British India strengthened, the colonial view of the Bhotias also changed: They came to be viewed as lawless wanderers, who raised the suspicion of the authorities because their mobile lifestyles didn't recognise hard boundaries. Grazing came to be heavily taxed, and many forests were labelled as "reserved" forests. This sparked off a long-term movement for resistance among the Kumaoni people from 1916 to 1921, which ultimately resulted in the grazing tax being removed and the area under the "reserved forest" category being reduced in size.

A second upheaval affecting the lives and livelihoods of these tribes occurred during the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Many of these tribes practice transhumance, migrating to villages (called mait by the Bhotias) in the upper reaches of the mountains during summer, and descending to the downstream settlement called gunsha in winter. This motility was also evident in their regular trade with Tibet, such that all the seven Bhotia groups often congregated at Gartok, Tibet as a social space. It should also be noted that these tribes were successful traders, functioning as go-betweens between the

northern Tibet trade and southern markets of the Paharis. Furthermore, they also facilitated pilgrims going to Kailash Mansarovar.

When the 1962 war broke out, the Jad Bhotias were evacuated from their border villages (mait) and resettled in the Bagori region in the south. This was followed by a massive project of expanding rural roads in the region for troop movement by the Indian state. As a result, administrative expansion, schools, healthcare centres and rural development programmes followed. The Kumaon Bhotia People's Federation (formed in 1947), vigorously campaigned for Scheduled Tribe status on account of the "backwardness" and "primitiveness" of the Bhotias, and got this status in 1967. However, with the blocking of the border, the economic life of the trading tribes had been disrupted. The increased militarisation of the region also restricted their traditional transhumance and forced them into sedentary agriculture. While the elite members of these tribes transitioned into government jobs, many Bhotias began working as porters and labourers.

Agricultural practices also changed as a result: They began rearing cattle instead of goats and sheep (no longer needed as pack animals), and indigenous varieties of crops were replaced by commercial cultivation and mono-cropping, especially growing chives and caraway. Chandra Singh Negi (2007) notes that this has threatened the ecological sustainability in the region, leading to a "tragedy of commons". The impact of this shift in lifestyle has also been cultural: These tribes are slowly losing traditional industries and markets like those for woollen handicrafts. When Lipulekh pass was opened after the India-China agreement of 1993, these communities resumed trade with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), especially targeting wild medicinal herbs like kutki, atis and kida, with the latter being very popular among the Chinese upper class. In *India and China: Rethinking Borders and Security*, Mahendra P Lama writes that after the India-China agreement of 1993, local trade via Lipulekh pass steadily increased from \$6,000 in 1992-93 to \$1,00,000 in 1996-97.

However, strained relations with territorial neighbours have made this formerly flourishing trade intermittent. Despite evidence for the potential of this trade relation, Nepal's claims over the tri-junction (which also comprises the passes of the trading routes), and China's renewed aggression, has side-lined these priorities.

Through this analysis, we attempt to show how challenges of boundary demarcation have local impacts, by drawing case studies from the area which is part of India's Uttarakhand, has been claimed by Nepal since the 1990s, and has witnessed the entry of China as the new neighbour after taking over Tibet. Especially in the light of claims about Nepalese citizens moving in this zone, allegations of Nepal interacting with locals in the disputed region and both India and Nepal including this area in their respective national maps, evolving good practices by taking local contexts into account is a need of the hour. As argued above, the geopolitical ramifications of map-making and territorial claims make it essential to integrate local inhabitants in development policy in order to safeguard unique cultures, lifestyles and economic practices. By emphasising on preventing the deterioration of border communities, having rehabilitation alternatives, and offering alternative and sustainable livelihoods, citizens on the ground would cease to remain a statistic in diplomacy.

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