

Borderlands Brokers: War to Peace Transition in Nepal

(District Mapping Papers: Bardiya, Dolpa, Humla and Saptari)

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List of Abbreviations

BNP	Bardiya National Park
CIEDP	Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CPN-M	Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists
CVC	Conflict Victims' Committee
CVSJ	Conflict Victim Society for Justice
DADO	District Agriculture Development Office
DDC	District Development Committee
GoN	Government of Nepal
MoFALD	Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development
NEFAD	National Network of Families of the Disappeared and Missing
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
RNA	Royal Nepal Army
SGM	Sexual and Gender Minorities
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Introduction

Sujeet Karn

The district papers in this series are drawn from research conducted for the project 'Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding in Nepal.' This project aimed to generate an understanding of contested war to peace transitions in Nepal with a view to improving statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions in post-war contexts in South Asia and beyond.

Within this research, the margins of the state were taken as the primary vantage point for understanding and explaining the political and economic dynamics of 'post war' transition. This approach inverts the top down, centrist orientation commonly applied to studies of (and policy responses to) post-war statebuilding and reconstruction.

The exploration particularly focused on the overarching research questions:

How have trajectories of post-war transition been shaped by, and influenced, processes of political and economic change at the margins of the state?

This is further divided into three sub questions:

- What are the specific ways in which peripheral zones influence post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction processes at the national level?
- What are the roles and impacts of borderland brokers on these processes?
- How do international peacebuilding and reconstruction interventions influence war to peace transitions and with what effects for borderland communities and marginalized groups?

Research process

Research was conducted over two years in borderlands regions in Nepal, in addition to gathering detailed life histories of women and men who mediate between state peripheries and the centre – people we have called 'borderland brokers.' An initial mapping exercise of various sites was carried out, and these districts mapping papers are the outcome of the initial work that was carried out in various districts.

The method used to conduct this research was of semi structured interviews conducted mainly with donors, NGO and civil society members, academic and media personnel, government officials, politicians and community leaders and members at various sites. Detailed case studies of the social, economic and political dynamics of selected borderland regions were conducted. During the first phase of the research the team selected particular locals within the borderland for more focused research. Bardiya, Dolpa, Humla and Saptari were thus became the sites for further explorations.

District papers

These papers focus on Bardiya, Dolpa and Saptari districts. Through these district papers, an attempt is made to give an overview of the major economic and social concerns of each of activities that is operational in the districts. Special attention is paid to the activities of government, donor, private sector and non-governmental initiatives in these sites.

Thus these district papers are somewhat a reflection of the mapping of key institutions and leaders/brokers that interface between the national and locals at the periphery and how in these processes resources flow into and out of these sites. Who controls it? And how it reflects on the life of the people in the borderland regions? Community members' perceptions regarding state and non-state development initiatives are also analysed in various district papers.

We hope that these papers can serve as a pointer in exploring how agency and structure come together at certain critical moments or turning points in war to peace transitions. For instance Saptari district paper argues that in the process of state formation in Nepal, peripheral spaces were ignored and led to decline of Rajbiraj, the district town of Saptari. After war to peace transition period uneven territorialisation especially in Mdhesh has led to contested regime and it is continuing which has bearing of the past. The differential level of state and capital penetration into the border regions – in Nepal, the friction of distance and terrain, and the lack of state capacity, including its limited fiscal base, have led to a far more limited state presence at the margins that has contributed to further marginalisation of a district town of Rajbiraj in Saptari.

The Bardiya district paper aims to provide a brief account of historical as well as contemporary Bardiya believing that it will act as a reference point for further and in-depth analysis of post-war transitional processes in Bardiya and in the wider western Terai region of Nepal.

Bardiya offers an important vantage point in understanding some of the root causes of decade-long armed conflict (1996-2006) and complex post-war transitional processes in Nepal. The paper argues that although Bardiya has productive land yet unequal distribution underpinned by exploitative agricultural labour practices involving indigenous *Tharu* communities have all shaped Bardiya's political, economic, social and cultural landscapes both in the past and the present.

In the paper, development of feudal land and labour relations in Bardiya is discussed followed by analyses on some of the socio-political dynamics during armed conflict to understand why Tharus were the most affected community in the district subjected to the highest rate of enforced disappearances by the State in Nepal. Cross-border relations in the pre-war time, during the war and post-war contexts are also explored. Hence Bardiya paper points to the processes of exclusionary development that is reflected and reinforced the marginality of borderland populations.

Humla study gives a brief demographic update on its people and life. It further provides a synopsis of people's engagement with the northern border and the role of Nepali state.

Similarly the district mapping of Dolpo is an attempt to illustrate the stories of continuity and transformations of the people, their adaptations to outsiders, and realignments of economic and political engagements that had taken place since the post Maoists movement. More specifically this paper explores the ways in which how after 2007 war to peace transitions period; Dolpo is featuring itself within Nepali nation-state.

Finally, these four district studies indicate to the fact that Post-war transition in Nepal reflects an ongoing instability and multiple forms of resistance. The borderlands spaces have become places of innovation and experimentation and rapid social change – in terms of expectations of the state, self-governance and discourses about rights etc.



BARDIYA DISTRICT STUDY

Chapter 1

Contemporary Dynamics of Post-War Transitions in Nepal: A Case of Bardiya

Sangita Thebe Limbu

Introduction & Background

Located in the mid-western region and federal province number 5 of Nepal, Bardiya offers an important vantage point in understanding some of the root causes of the decade-long armed conflict (1996-2006) and complex post-war transitional processes in Nepal. Commonly referred to as the *anna bhandhar* (grain store) of the western Nepal (DDC 2014: 3), Bardiya lies adjacent to Banke on the east and Kailali on the west. Surkhet and Salyan are both situated on its northern side and North India lies across its southern border (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Geographically, it occupies a total area of 2025 sq. km, two-thirds of which is covered by plain lowlands while one-third is covered by *Chure* hills (DDC 2014: 3) with elevation ranging from 120m to nearly 2000m above the sea level (GoN 2018). Out of its total land mass, 64 percent is covered by forest while 30 percent is covered by highly fertile, cultivable land. Despite limited commercial farming, Bardiya produces surplus crops, which increased from 107,861 metric tonnes in 2009 to 216,482 metric tonnes in 2014 (DDC 2014: 3). On average, the percentage of surplus crops is at 46.85 percent (DADO 2015: 1). High productivity of land yet, the unequal distribution of land and wealth, which are underpinned by exploitative agricultural labour practices involving indigenous *Tharu* communities, have all shaped Bardiya's political, economic, social and cultural landscape both in the past and the present.

This study aims to provide a brief overview of historical and contemporary Bardiya, largely based on first-hand interviews with various actors and stakeholders who have been involved in initiating and/or steering different socio-political processes in the post-war context, as well as secondary literature on Bardiya and surrounding areas. Narratives presented in this paper largely draw upon fieldwork conducted during 2017 and 2018 in *Gulariya*, the administrative headquarter of Bardiya, and *Dalla*, a village located in the buffer zone of Bardiya National Park. *Dalla* was severely affected during the armed conflict with 18 enforced disappearances predominantly by the State authorities, but now it has become a popular destination for homestay ecotourism. A total of 50 participants were selected for semi-structured qualitative interviews



Figure 1: Provincial map of Nepal (Source: Election Commission Nepal 2018)

municipal and ward levels, NGO staff, conflict victims, human rights activists, journalists, armed police officers at the Nepal-India border in *Murtiya*, local shopkeepers and market traders. Secondary literature review was also conducted to verify and bolster primary data findings. This paper, rather than provide an in-depth analysis on particular set of issues, will highlight various themes and lenses of analysing post-war transitional processes in Bardiya that surfaced during the fieldwork in the district. In relation to transitional justice, which is an evolving discourse, this paper captures the developments that unfolded up until August 2018. The paper further provides an overview of various facets of Bardiya's history, politics, society and environment, and it aims to act as a reference point for further in-depth analysis of post-war transitional processes in Bardiya and in the wider western Tarai region of Nepal.

The paper begins by outlining some of the demographic features of Bardiya including population composition, literacy rate, poverty level and economic livelihoods. The history of western Tarai and its implications for the development of feudal land and labour relations in Bardiya are then discussed followed by analyses of some of the socio-political dynamics during the armed conflict period to understand why Tharus were the most affected community in the district subjected to the highest rate of enforced disappearances by the State in Nepal. Contemporary dynamics related to transitional justice, new forms of governance, and environment conservation are then discussed. Cross-border relations in the pre-war time, during the war and post-war contexts are also explore briefly.

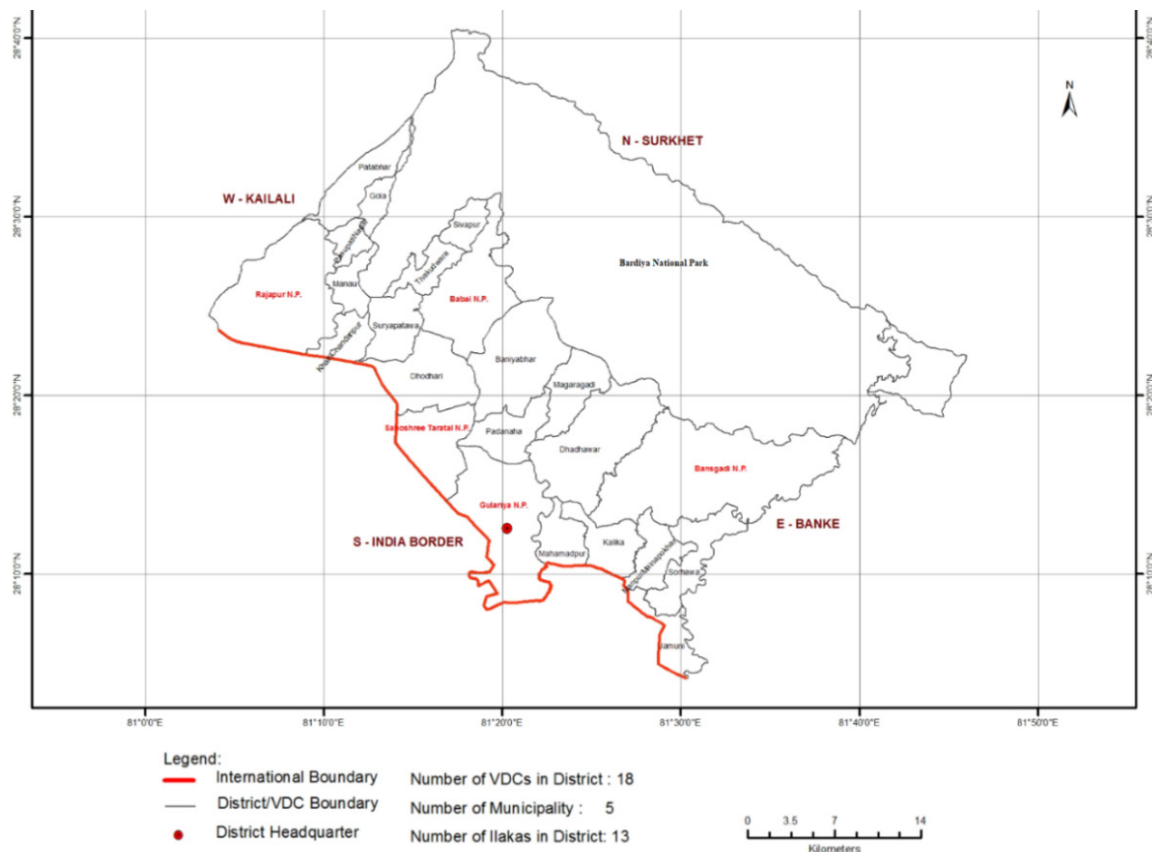


Figure 2. Map of Bardiya district (Source: GoN 2018)

2. Demographic features

2.1 Population composition

According to 2011 census, the total population of Bardiya is 426,576, out of which the female population is 52% at 221,496, while the male population is 48% at 205,080 (CBS 2012). Tharus, one of the indigenous ethnic groups of the Tarai region, have the highest population in the district, which stands at 226,089 i.e. 53% of the total population. Chhettris and Brahmins (colloquially known as Bahun) from hilly region constitute 11% and 8.7% of the total population respectively. Some of the major caste/ethnic groups based on population size in Bardiya are outlined in the Table 1.

2.2 Literacy and educational attainment

The average literacy rate of Bardiya is 65.7% but there is a stark gender gap with female literacy rate at 57.9% compared to 73.5% for male (CBS 2014: 40). In terms of educational progression and attainment, although 75.10% of students are enrolled at lower secondary level (class 6-8), the secondary school completion rate (class 9-10) is only 29.8% according to 2014 statistics (DDC 2014: 39).

Table 1: Population composition of Bardiya based on caste/ethnicity

Caste/ ethnic groups	Total population	% of the total population
Tharu	226,089	53%
Chhettri	48,835	11%
Hill Bahun	37,180	8.7%
Kami	24,406	5.7%
Magar	12,545	2.9%
Muslim	11,072	2.6%
Thakuri	9,984	2.34%
Yadav	8,083	1.89%

Source: DDC (2014: 12).

2.3 Poverty level and life expectancy

In 2011, Bardiya ranked 45th in Nepal in terms of poverty level, which is an improvement from its 51st position in 2001. The percentage of people in Bardiya living below poverty line was 44.9% in 2001, and in 2011, it was reduced to 28.7%. (DDC 2014: 17) The average life expectancy in 2014 was 67.36 compared to 61.41 in 2009 (DDC 2014: 17) .

2.4 Agriculture and livelihoods

The total area of cultivable land in Bardiya was 75,000 hectares in 2009 and in 2014, it went down to 60,100 hectares (DDC 2014: 20) perhaps due to increasing number of government supported community forest initiatives¹. Out of the total cultivated land, 71% is irrigated (DADO 2015: 7). Rice, wheat, maize, potato and oil crops are the major crops (DADO 2015: 7). Bardiya has highly fertile land but at the same time, the issue of landlessness is also particularly high. According to the Government of Nepal's Land Reform Office's 2017 data, there were a total of 11,875 landless *Kamaiya* families in Bardiya out of which 10,714 families have been rehabilitated. The land distribution inequalities and bonded labour *Kamaiya* system will be discussed in further detail in section 3.

In 2009, almost 88% of the Bardiya's population was dependent on agriculture, but that rate went down to 75% in 2014 (DDC 2014:20) primarily due to increased migration to urban centres and foreign countries.² Few people are engaged in commercial farming, but the numbers are steadily rising, from 125 to 1150 between 2009 and 2014 (DDC 2014: 20). As of 2014, 35% of the population is engaged in more than

¹ Interview conducted on February 21, 2018 with a journalist in Gulariya who works for both local and national media.

² Interviews conducted between February 19-27, 2018 in Gulariya and Dalla with various local representatives, activists and villagers.

one form of economic activity, which is a 10 percent rise from 2009 (DDC 2014:53). In terms of the number of tourists (domestic and international) visiting the district, it has increased from 20,000 in 2009 to 32,000 in 2014 (DDC 2014: 30).

In one of our field sites – *Dalla* village, running homestays was taken as a supplementary source of income besides agriculture. There appears to be generational differences whereby although agriculture has remained traditional occupation for Tharus, the younger generation who are more educated than their parents are seeking non-agricultural opportunities and increasingly migrating to nearby towns and beyond. Those who have stayed back in the village are also engaged in various activities including homestays, public health insurance³ brokerage and handicraft businesses. The rate of co-operatives providing small scale loans has increased in Bardiya. In fact, it was declared as ‘a model district for cooperatives’ by Prime Minister KP Oli in 2016 (MyRepublica 2016). As of 2014, there were over 351 co-operatives with the largest concentration in *Bansgadhi* and *Gulariya*, reaching an estimated 80,267 clients i.e. 19% of the total population of Bardiya district (DDC 2014: 34). At the same time, the closure rate has also increased as many people are involved in multiple cooperatives and are unable to pay back the loan with high interest rates. The government is expected to introduce new laws to curb the number of co-operative memberships.⁴

3. Bardiya and history of western Tarai

To explain the historical context of Bardiya, majority of the literature refer to 1867 A.D. when four districts - Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur, which were lost by Nepal during Sugauli Treaty with British East India Company in 1816 A.D., were given back as an appreciation for Nepal’s military support in suppressing the Indian Sepoy Rebellion in 1857-8. Thereafter, those four districts came to be known collectively as *naya muluk*, meaning “new country” (Regmi 1999, Dhakal et al. 2000, Guneratne 2002, Whelpton 2005). During that time Nepal was ruled by autocratic Rana regime (1846 – 1951), and half of the entire “new country” areas were granted as *birta*⁵, to Jung Bahadur Rana, then prime minister of Nepal, and his brothers (Regmi 1999). Prior to that, Bardiya was a dense forest with sparsely populated Tharu settlements.

The literal meaning of Bardiya in Tharu local language is ‘a male cattle herder’ (Dhakal et al. 2000: 4). The naming of the district as Bardiya suggests that Tharus were indigenous to the area (Dhakal et al. 2000: 4), although further information on human settlements in Bardiya prior to migration of Tharus from other parts of Nepal such as Dang and influx of hill migrants is few and far between. Tharus are indigenous

³ The Public Health Insurance programme was launched by the central government of Nepal in the fiscal year 2016-17. As part of this programme, each household comprising of up to five family members must pay a premium of 2,500 NPR annually which will help them access health services worth 50,000 NPR. Those families with more than five members must pay 425 NPR for each additional member, which will qualify them for an additional insurance cover of worth 10,000 NPR. (The Kathmandu Post 2018). The programme also covers Bardiya and some of the participants in the area are engaged in promoting the benefits of the programme to their neighbours and acquaintances, and signing them up for the insurance plan. For each client registered, they receive certain percent as commission (The Kathmandu Post 2018).

⁴ Interviews conducted in February 22, 2018 with NGO staff running women’s cooperative in Gulariya and a local journalist

⁵ *Birta* refers to system of land grants to royal family members and nobilities as patronage and gifts.

people who are native to the Tarai region. They are known to have ‘malaria resistance’ capacity and thus, they were able to live across Tarai belt despite malaria prone dense forests prior to 1950s. Tharus in the eastern Tarai region share many cultural similarities with the other caste/ethnic groups in terms of their language, clothes, rituals, while those in the west, particularly in Dang-Deokhuri and *naya muluk* areas including Bardiya, are considered to be more distinctly apart from rest of the population (Guneratne, 2002: 46).

3.1 Emergence of *birta* holders, influx of hill migrants and encroachment of Tharu lands

In the “new country” areas, known to be part of malaria-prone Tarai region, *birta* holders or land grant beneficiaries of Rana regime mostly became absentee landlords. They used Tharu peasants as tenants to clear the forests and cultivate land to reap benefits from their agricultural produce. Due to low population of the region, migration from hill and India was encouraged to mitigate agricultural labour constraints. At the same time, the construction of railways in Northern India opened opportunities for trade of timber so, the Rana rulers further encouraged migration to clear the forest for timber export. Influx of migrants in western Tarai in general brought about emergence of intermediaries and local brokers in the form of *jimindars*, *chaudharys*, *pargana* etc. who used their political connections to appropriate communal land of Tharus (Dhakal et al., 2000: 34). This process intensified in the post-1950 period, following successful malaria eradication programme led by the US, that further increased migration from hills to Tarai (Guneratne 2002). It was also a period when the Rana regime had been ousted through political movement led by King Tribhuvan of Shah dynasty and Nepali Congress political party in 1951 that led to introduction of multiparty democratic system in Nepal. However, Nepal’s experimentation with democracy was short-lived as King Mahendra, son of King Tribhuvan, usurped political power in 1960. After that, the autocratic monarch banned political parties and introduced the *Panchayat* system (1960-1990), a four-tier system of governance including village, district, zone and national level assembly with sovereign power vested in the monarch. Amidst his growing wariness of India where dissidents of his regime could potentially mobilise, King Mahendra aimed to consolidate power and build ‘Nepali identity’ based on Hindu and hill-centric nationalism by further encouraging migration of ‘high-caste’ hill people to Tarai as they shared caste, language and cultural similarities with the State rulers (Guneratne 2002, Gaige 2009).

Subsequently, increased rate of migration from hills, introduction of cash-based economy, fraudulent money lending practices, debt, lack of awareness of state mechanisms and political connections all served to reduce Tharus’ ownership of land in their native region (Guneratne 2002: 91). Besides some of the local community leaders and heads, most of the Tharus became tenants, sharecroppers, landless labourers (Dhakal et al. 2000: 35) and in some cases, bonded labourers as part of the *Kamaiya* system, which was predominantly based on appropriation of Tharus’ traditional social system built on kinship, ethnic and communal ties.

3.2 Co-optation of traditional Tharu practices to create bonded labour relations

In Tharu cultural practice, *Bhuyar*, meaning the God of Land is considered as the ‘God of all Gods.’ which symbolises the importance of land and its reverence within the community. Tharus’ historical and

traditional understanding of land was based on the notion that it was a communal resource with emotional attachments, and that it could not be owned, held or possessed as private property (Dhakal et al. 2000: 28). The social system established within Tharu communities was also culturally rooted. For instance, the traditional system of governance within Tharus would entail election of *Badghar* (the village head) by *ghardhuriyas* (head of each family unit) in *Khel* (village assembly). The *Badghar* would then go onto assign *Gurba*, religious priest, and other members. Traditionally, each household would contribute 2 days of labour in a year to *Badghar* and *Gurba*. However, with increased migration from hills alongside large-scale annexation of Tharu lands, Tharu households were forced to provide free labour, sometimes involving all family members in different capacities for years, to the emerging elite groups of ‘high caste’ hill landlords and local intermediaries who shared political connections with the State. Such practice later became institutionalised in the form of bonded labour *Kamaiya* system. (Dhakal et al. 2000).

The term *Kamaiya* in Tharu language means any male other than the head of household who works in agricultural field. However, such meaning, both in understanding and practice, became distorted and later, the government in 1995 defined *Kamaiyas* along with *Haliyas*⁶ as “those ‘bonded’ agricultural labourers who are forced to provide hard physical labour without receiving the wage of his/her contribution to repay debt taken by him/herself or by family members at present or in the past” (Dhakal et al. 2000). At the same time, in the name of repaying debt, young girls known as *Kamlahris* were forced to provide domestic help in landlords’ houses where they were vulnerable to sexual violence. Thus, the traditional Tharu social system, based on kinship and communal values, was co-opted by elite landlords and intermediaries as they recreated and redefined pre-existing relationships and social contracts into exploitative feudal relations resulting in acute power imbalance. When the government abolished the *kamaiya* system in 2000, there were 18,400 *kamaiya* households with a population of 101,500 primarily concentrated in five districts in the western Tarai with the highest numbers in Bardiya at 6,949 households (Adhikari 2008: 52).

3.3 Migration of Tharus from other parts of Tarai to *Naya Muluk* districts

While Bardiya is the focus of this study, the political developments and socio-structural changes that unfolded in Bardiya did not occur in isolation. Those were deeply connected to the broader dynamics in Bardiya’s neighbouring districts along with wider processes of the Nepali state formation under King Mahendra during *Panchayat* regime. Within this context, it is important to look at Dang district, which is the original homeland of many Tharus who now live in Bardiya. For instance, in Dang, the same processes of increased migration from hills took place and those processes continued as the land reform program was launched in 1964, which sought to impose a ceiling on land ownership. But the program was a failure in addressing Tharus’ dispossession off their lands. Tharu’s lack of understanding of government regulations including land registration processes made it easier for hill migrants to fraudulently register the land under their names. For hill migrants, it was also relatively easier to bribe government officials, mostly of hill origin themselves. In some cases, intimidation and threats were also deployed against Tharus to dispossess them and reduce their status to tenants or bonded labourers (Guneratne 2002: 95).

⁶ The system of bonded labour, similar to *Kamaiya* system, practised in hilly regions particularly in the mid and far-western regions of Nepal.

As a result, although in 1920s most of the landlords were Tharus, by the late 1960s, the great majority of them were *Pahadis*, meaning people from hills. In Dang, 80 percent of the Tharus were tenants with little to no land, and 90 percent of them cultivated lands were owned by Pahadi landlords (McDonaugh cited in Guneratne 2002: 95).

Just like in Bardiya, *corvée* or *begari* was very common in Tharu households after the appropriation of land by *Pahadi* settlers. They had to perform *corvée* labour, which in the context of Dang, included agricultural work as well as the construction of houses, roads, bridges and becoming porters to carry palanquins for landlords' family members when they wished to travel. At the same time, women had to work as domestic help, where they were often subjected to sexual abuse and violence. Landlords were important local supporters of Panchayat system hence, refusal to perform *corvée* labour would entail harassment and violence at the hands of landlords, their henchmen and police officials. As a result, there was mass migration of Tharus out of Dang to settle in the districts of Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur, and as many as, six thousand people had migrated to Banke and Bardiya during 1960s/70s. (Guneratne 2002: 43). But even in those districts they were exposed to similar forms of exploitation as the nexus of local landlords, state security officials and autocratic Panchayat regime perpetuated exploitation and dispossession of Tharu communities.

In general, the historical context of western Tarai and Bardiya are of great significance as the development of feudal land and labour relationships in those regions is at the heart of understanding the implications of armed conflict between the Maoists and the State, which started few years after multiparty democracy was restored back through political uprisings in 1990 as will be further discussed in section 4.

3.4 Border dynamics in the pre-war period

For those migrating from the western hilly regions of Nepal to Gulariya in Bardiya, India used to be the primary route of travel in the pre-war period. There were no major roads in Bardiya until early 1980s so, people used to travel to Lucknow and board the train to reach Murtiya border and from there travel to Gulariya⁷. Tharu population in Bardiya can be broadly categorised into two groups – *Desauri* Tharus, who are considered native to Bardiya, and *Dang/Deukhuri* Tharus who migrated from *Dang/Deukhuri* areas. The Tharu landlords usually come from *Desauri* Tharu groups.⁸ Among the Tharu participants, there seemed to be a general consensus that *Dang/Deukhuri* Tharus are politically more aware and active given their experiences of exploitation at the hands of landlords in their native *Dang* region. Unlike *Dang/Deukhuri* Tharus, the native *Desauri* Tharus of Bardiya share cross border relations through marriage and family connections with Tharus living on the other side of the border in India. The culture of cross-border marriage was much more prevalent in the past but it has declined in the last two decades as the level of education has increased and young Tharus living on both sides of the border are interested in engaging in non-agricultural professions⁹. And so, moving across the border after marriage proves challenging

⁷ Interviews conducted on August 11, 2018 with a local journalist and a land rights activist in Gulariya. Their families had migrated from Baitadi and Parbat respectively.

⁸ Interviews between August 10-20, 2018 with Tharu participants in Bardiya.

⁹ Interviews conducted on August 14, 2018 with one of the *Desauri* Tharu participants in Gulariya.

due to language barriers particularly for those migrating from India who find it difficult to understand Nepali language¹⁰. Hence, the practice of cross-border marriage among *Desauri* Tharus is on the decline.

4. Armed conflict between Maoists and the State (1996-2006)

In February 1996, Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (hereafter referred as CPN-M) declared “People’s War” demanding secular state, end to caste/ethnic discrimination, revisiting of the 1950 Treaty with India, banning privatised education, promoting protectionist economic policies among many others through its 40-point demand (Bohora 2002), which was overlooked by the then ruling government led by Nepali Congress. The armed conflict between CPN-M and the State officially ended in November 2006 with signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between both parties, in a context where most of the political parties had formed an alliance with CPN-M against King Gyanendra, who usurped sovereign power in 2005 but had to restore it back to the parliament due to another political uprising in 2006. During the conflict, a total of 12,686 individuals, including both combatants and civilians, were killed (OHCHR 2008: 9), while the total number of enforced disappearances was 1,347 (ICRC 2015: 1). Of all districts, Bardiya records the highest number of enforced disappearances as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Districts with the highest number of disappearances (1996-2006)

District	By State			By Non-state	Total
	Army	Police	Security personnel	By Maoist	
Bardiya	169	19	19	13	220
Dang	37	4	20	8	69
Banke	21	24	12	4	61
Salyan	17	8	1	2	28
Dhading	19	2	5	1	27
Rolpa	12	11	0	4	27
Total	275	68	57	32	432

Source: INSEC (2011)

The government data reveals a higher number of enforced disappearances along with additional data on conflict victims (see Table 3).

In 2008 report, OHCHR mentions that over 200 cases of enforced disappearances predominantly by the State authorities including Royal Nepal Army – RNA (now known as Nepal Army), were reported in Bardiya. Out of these, OHCHR investigated and documented 156 cases of enforced disappearances by the State authorities between December 2001 and January 2003. Of the investigations conducted, 138 victims were male and 18 were female, whereas 21 of those victims were children aged between

¹⁰ Interviews conducted on August 14, 2018 with one of the Desauri Tharu participants in Gulariya.

14 and 17 years at the time of their arrest. The largest number of victims (74) were between 18 and 27 years old. 18 female victims were between 18 to 23 years old (OHCHR 2008:21). Over 85 percent (135 individuals) of the disappeared were Tharus. In 146 cases, victims' occupations were also noted, and more than half of them (74) were found to be subsistence farmers comprising of tenants, sharecroppers, former *kamaiyas*, agricultural and seasonal labourers. In some cases, activists and local school teachers who had been advocating for Tharus' land and socio-political rights without any affiliation to CPN-M were also subjected to enforced disappearances, whereas 23 of the victims were CPN-M members at the time of their disappearance (OHCHR 2008: 21). The question then becomes why was the rate of enforced disappearances by RNA the highest in Bardiya? And why were over 85 percent of those disappeared from Tharu communities? Three factors could have potentially provided impetus to the armed conflict in Bardiya, which are outlined below:

Table 3. Conflict victims in Bardiya

S.N.	Category	Numbers
1	Death	399
2	Disappeared	271
3	Displaced	857
4	Disabled	71
5	Injured	546
6	House/land capture	264
7	Kidnapping	186
8	Victims asking for compensation	249

Source: DDC (2014: 53)

4.1 Feudal land systems and dispossession/exploitation of Tharus

Dispossession of Tharus from their traditional land and perpetuation of their marginalisation through lack of political representation and access to the state protection and services including education could be attributed to creating an acute power imbalance between the land grant beneficiaries, landlords, local intermediaries and Tharus leaving the latter vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (OHCHR 2008: 17). Dhakal et al. (2000: 32) argue that the historical processes resulting in concentration of resources such as land in the hands of few and 'appropriation of economic surplus generated from the peasants by the ruling elite under the patronage of statehood from the 18th century onwards' is the root cause of Tharus' continued marginalisation and conflict in the region. Many interviewees during the fieldwork also mentioned 'extremely unequal' distribution of resources and exploitation of Tharus not only by the *Pahadis* but also by the state that offered a conducive ground for Maoists to mobilise local people to join the war or at the very least gain sympathy for their cause through the rhetoric of emancipation and land reform. One of the human rights activists from Tharu community¹¹ said, 'Where there is exploitation, there will

¹¹ Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 22, 2018.

be conflict and resistance. That was the case in Bardiya.¹² As a result, high involvement of marginalised Tharu communities in the Maoist movement could be the reason why Bardiya was targeted specifically by RNA, but of course, this rationale is further reinforced by other factors.

4.2 Emergence of *Kamaiya* Liberation movement and perception of Tharus as Maoists

Preceding the armed conflict, the *Kamaiya* Liberation Movement emerged in the early 1990s. This movement advocated for an end to the bonded labour *kamaiya* system and demanded land and socio-political rights for Tharus. This non-partisan movement largely led by civil society NGO ran parallel to the armed conflict and eventually culminated in the government's decision to liberate *Kamaiya* labourers through adoption of Kamaiya Labour Prohibition Act in 2002, although the provisions of the Act including those on rehabilitation have never been fully implemented (OHCHR 2008: 8). That was the context within which 'high caste' landowners felt threatened by Tharus and their emerging movement demanding land rights. As a result, the distinction between CPN-M insurgency and non-partisan Tharus' land rights movement became blurred and the perception that "all Tharus are Maoists" developed among landowning class (OHCHR 2008: 18). Such perceptions informed RNA personnel's understanding of the context largely due to their caste and cultural ties with the landowning *Pahadi* elites. As a result, civil society organisations, intellectuals, activists and leaders who were not CPN-M members but were known to fight for the rights of minorities were also targeted by the RNA for cordon and search operations as well as arrests and disappearances (OHCHR 2008: 28).

4.3 The nexus of feudal landlords, Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and the State

When asked why Tharus had the highest rate of enforced disappearances during war-time, one of the Tharu human rights activists, who was also a Bardiya-based journalist during war time, said:

That's the result of the state's oppression against Tharu community. There are two things – the feudal landlords and their children are all present in the State mechanism in some form or the other. When Tharus demanded their rights, according to human rights you cannot violate their right to protest, but if you add the label of Maoists then, it becomes easier for the state to oppress them. That's what happened. You should read OHCHR's report. It is in-depth and by far the best report about the district. Because all the people who have been accused of ordering the killings in that report are sons of those feudal landlords. In all three branches of security, they are the ones. And they will obviously give command to their juniors.¹²

In the OHCHR's report, some of the accused army commanding officers and police superintendents active in Bardiya during the period of increased disappearances of civilians come from hill Chhettri/Bahun caste groups such as *Swar*, *Jung Thapas*, *Ranas*, *Khadga*, *Rayamajhi* and *Sharma* (OHCHR 2008: 28-34). The caste groups mentioned are similar to that of some of the migrant hill community that form land-owning

¹² Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 24, 2018.

elites in Bardiya.¹³ Although more research is required to explore connections and kinship ties between those landlords and the state security officials, OHCHR (2008: 18) suggests that ‘the links of kinship and caste between these landowners and members of the high-caste groups of hill origin that dominated State institutions’ created and reinforced negative perceptions towards Tharus and other minorities who were ‘claiming their rights vis-à-vis landowners or State authorities as they were at increasing risk of being labelled as Maoists and insurgents.’ On the RNA personnel, Aditya Adhikari argues:

With an officer class largely drawn from the aristocratic Thakuri-Chhetri castes, the entire institution was steeped in an old royalist-feudal ethos that was reflected in their attitude of entitled superiority and lack of understanding of the political grievances festering in Nepali society. This, along with their wrong-headed military strategy, was a crucial factor underlying their callous and inhumane treatment of marginalized groups like the Tharus. (2014: 90)

Hence, all these factors played important role in shaping the socio-political and security dynamics during war-time in Bardiya, which consequently resulted in the highest number of enforced disappearances including pervasive extra-judicial killings, torture, rape and sexual violence, although the latter two have remained highly underreported mainly due to social stigma, weak war crime documentation processes¹⁴ and dismal prosecution record. The issue of transitional justice, which still hangs in limbo, will be discussed further in section 5, including some of the contemporary developments that have happened since the war officially ended nearly a decade ago.

4.4 Border dynamics during the war period

During the war, Maoists used to cross the border and travel to India frequently to collect arms and ammunition. One of the ex-combatants mentioned that they did not know who the suppliers were, they were just directed to go and collect things such as bullets, bombs, gelatine and dynamite. The cadres would go through Gulariya-Murtiya border down to a local market at Balai in Uttar Pradesh in India to collect the goods. The suppliers would load the arms and ammunitions in trucks, while the Maoist cadres checked the number of items and made payment. They would then bring the items through the Indian borders without encountering any checking. In the densely forested Nepali border area surrounding Bardiya, there were no security forces. There only used to be a forestry office. Maoists threatened the forestry officials and also made them cook food. Occasionally, they also kept the arms and ammunitions in the forestry office if they were unable to carry them to their destination. Later, they would go back to collect those items. The forestry staff used to agree to whatever Maoists asked them to do as the latter would use threats and intimidated them. In this way, the dense forest bordering Nepal-India border in Bardiya was used as supply route for ammunitions by the Maoists during war-time.

¹³ Interviews conducted with local residents of Dalla and Gulariya between February 19-28 and August 8-20, 2018.

¹⁴ Interviews conducted between February 19-28, 2018 with human rights activists and NGO staff working in Gulariya.

Post-war context and Bardiya in contemporary discourse

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006 between CPN-M and the government, Nepal entered a transitional post-war period. In the contemporary discourse, Bardiya district is perceived in many different ways. In media, Bardiya is commonly referred in the context of transitional justice in Nepal due to its highest number of enforced disappearances during war-time. Beyond that, Bardiya is also known for various other reasons. For instance, Bardiya is known as the area comprising of the second most popular national park in Nepal after Chitwan. It is also considered as one of the best destinations in Nepal to spot Royal Bengal tigers and one-horned rhinoceros, and it is also well-known for *Krishnashar*¹⁵ Conservation Area situated in Gulariya¹⁶. In the past, Bardiya used to be a popular hunting spot for royalties¹⁷ but now, it is increasingly getting popular for its conservation efforts, ecotourism and homestays run by Tharu communities in the buffer zone area (Panta and Thapa 2017).

Despite its growing popularity based on its biodiversity, flora and fauna, and ecotourism, Bardiya is also perceived as one of the most vulnerable districts from climate change perspective. One of the Kathmandu-based NGO staff currently working in Bardiya on climate change project highlights how Bardiya was chosen as one of the six most vulnerable districts for climate change in Nepal due to various factors including high poverty rate, low access to technology, high risk of flooding and so on. Hence, they were running various programmes funded by a consortium of international donors to mitigate the risks and support people in developing sustainable economic livelihoods.

On the other hand, local NGO staff working for Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGM) including lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex mentioned how Bardiya has one of the highest concentration of SGM across Nepal due to its close border with India and relatively less rigid Tharu culture¹⁸. Hence, this paper will further explore, albeit briefly, some of the aforementioned perceptions and issues to highlight the different lenses through which Bardiya is being understood by different stakeholders, and the wider implications on the district's contemporary socio-political and economic dynamics.

5.1 Transitional justice

Truth seeking and addressing human rights violation during the armed conflict were important elements of peacebuilding in the context of the post-war Nepal. The CPA signed by the CPN-M and the government has following related articles:

¹⁵ *Krishnashar* also known as Blackbuck in English, is an endangered species of deer known to be found only in Nepal, India and Pakistan.

¹⁶ Interview conducted on 26 February 2018 with environmental journalist, who works for local and national media, in Gulariya.

¹⁷ Interview conducted on February 26, 2018 with environmental journalist, who works for local and national media, in Gulariya.

¹⁸ Interview conducted on February 22, and August 15, 2018 with local NGO staff working for Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGM) including LGBTI community.

5.2.5. Both sides agree to set up a High-level Truth and Reconciliation Commission as per the mutual consensus in order to probe about those involved in serious violation of human rights and crime against humanity in course of the armed conflict and develop an atmosphere for reconciliation in the society.

5.2.3. Both sides also agree to make public within 60 days of signing of the agreement the real name, caste and address of the people made 'disappeared' or killed during the conflict and also inform the family members about it. (GoN 2006)

However, the CPA did not outline the timeline or processes involved in formation of those Commissions. After nine years since the CPA was signed, the truth commissions in the form of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Commission for the Inquiry of Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) were established. However, the 'Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2014' based on which the Commissions have been set up, remain controversial as they fail to meet the international human rights standards. Despite demands from victims, civil society groups and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), as well as repeated orders from the Supreme Court of Nepal, the current legal framework allows possibility for amnesties and impunity for gross human rights violations under international law, and gives the Commission authority to facilitate reconciliation without informed consent of the victims and their families (Carranza 2012; ICTJ Nepal and Martin Chautari 2017). Although the mandate for these truth commissions have been extended until February 2019, their only notable achievement so far has been collection of 58,000 complaints (Rai 2017).

5.1.1 Lacking documentation processes and stalled justice

The local activists associated with human rights NGO and conflict victims' committee highlight that documentation of war-time cases in Bardiya has taken place but nothing substantial has come out in terms of truth-seeking, prosecution and justice. Lack of political will, problematic foundational laws concerning TRC and CIEDP, lack of resources for those commissions as well as biased political appointments have been highlighted as some of the key reasons why transitional justice processes have not moved forward. One of the local human rights activists in Bardiya, who was one of the key figures in leading the documentation process complained that Bardiya had the highest rate of enforced disappearances of all districts but despite that truth commissions did not set up any local office in the district. Commenting on documentation process, he said:

The law that led to formations of those commissions in itself was weak so, they can't work effectively. They cannot work on prosecution aspects strongly. Besides, whether it's about disappearances, rape or other forms of human rights violation, they don't have the capability to write the truth. For instance, they prepare readymade documentation and publish it. But to find the truth and write about it, they should come to field and visit each victim's home. However, the

government has not given them any budget. So, what will they do sitting in Kathmandu? Just based on the information they receive from others, they prepare their reports.¹⁹

Lack of resources assigned to truth commissions also hindered processes of effective documentation. For instance, it was largely human rights NGOs and conflict victims' committees that led the process of documentation. Many interviewed NGO staff mentioned that crimes such as rape and sexual violence committed during war time have remained underreported. Besides social stigma, lack of privacy and limited female staff during documentation process have made it difficult for women to report those cases. Sexual violence, assault and torture faced by sexual and gender minorities during the war-time have not been recorded²⁰. In general, lack of resources has led to weak documentation, which will have further implications in accessing justice if those cases were to be taken forward in international criminal court in the future.

5.1.2 Interim relief program and compensation

In terms of relief and compensation, almost every war victims, whose family members were killed or disappeared, have now received Rs.10 lakhs (9,500 USD approx.) in Bardiya.²¹ There were also supposed to be scholarship provisions for victims' children, but the original guideline mentioned that only two children who are under the age of 18 in each victim's family would receive scholarships. That guideline has been amended and now regardless of their age, victims' children will be eligible for scholarships, but those amendments have not come into effect as the government might have amended the policies, but it is yet to allocate a separate budget for the district.

In addition, the wives of those who were killed have received a one-off sum of Rs. 25,000 (230 USD approx.). Those whose husbands were subjected to enforced disappearances have also received similar one-off compensation of equal value. Regarding orphaned children, they receive Rs. 5000 (45 USD approx.) monthly until they reach the age of 18. But in most cases, they have not been able to receive that amount on time because despite submitting all the documents, the working committee formed under the leadership of Chief District Officer (CDO) did not approve them on time. As a result, only about 16 children in the district have been receiving that amount as of August 2018²².

Carranza (2012) argues that the primary focus on financial compensation, without any material or symbolic measures to acknowledge the loss of victims and their families, is based on a blanket understanding of victimhood with everyone classed under 'conflict victims.' By doing so, the state has failed to recognise the specific needs of victims of human rights violation. Carranza (2012) further claims that reparation will not be sufficient to secure peace without recognition of state responsibility, truth-seeking and accountability, and initiatives to address root causes of the conflict.

¹⁹ Interview conducted on February 23, 2018 with one of the human rights activist in Gulariya.

²⁰ Interviews conducted between February 19-28, and 8-20 August 2018 with representatives of SGM focused NGO and other victims' committee and human rights NGOs involved in documentation processes in Gulariya.

²¹ Interviews conducted on February 25, 2018 with Conflict Victims' Committee (CVC) and human rights activists in Gulariya.

²² Interview conducted between February 19-28 and August, 8-20 2018 with Gulariya based human rights activist.

5.1.3 Needs of victims and challenges they face

It is difficult to generalise what each families' needs are but there appears to be two key priorities – knowing the truth about the missing and disappeared family members' whereabouts, followed closely by economic and livelihood concerns (Robbins and Bhandari 2012: 14). In Bardiya, victims have been facing economic challenges with primary breadwinners missing in most of the families. Families are also suffering psychologically due to lack of closure as they neither know the fate of their missing family members nor have they performed funeral rites. This situation has created difficulties particularly for women as on the one hand, they face social stigma as single women and their ambiguous social identity (neither wives nor widows) and in many cases, they are perceived as sexually available (Robbins and Bhandari 2012: 6). On the other hand, there have been legal challenges especially in cases where the lands have been under their husband's name or their husband was a government employee. In those cases, to use those assets and/or receive their husband's pension and relevant entitlements, those families have been forced to perform funeral rites and register their missing family members as dead out of compulsion²³.

According to laws in Nepal, women could not use the property under their husband's name for 12 years in cases where the husband disappeared, but the law has been challenged and amended to bring down the waiting period to 3 years in the context of conflict era disappearances²⁴. However, the broader implication for those who have registered their missing members as dead is that their cases have now been transferred from CIEDP to TRC. As a result, those families now face difficulties as they might never know the whereabouts of their missing family members as TRC only looks after death related cases.²⁵

Looking specifically at the cases of enforced disappearances in Bardiya, Robins (2012: 17) argues that for victims more than prosecutorial pathway to justice, gaining socio-economic rights that address their everyday needs is of greater priority. But victims' priorities are not reflected in the dominant transitional justice discourse, which is largely captured by elites at the expense of victims' agency and participation. Further, demanding socio-economic rights would entail challenging the pre-transitional status quo of the society, entrenched hierarchies, and broadening the discourse on social justice, and hence, the focus of human rights professionals continue to remain on prosecution and judicial agenda (Robins 2012; Robbins and Bhandari 2012). While the question of victims' everyday needs and livelihoods are important, it is equally important to consider why families of the disappeared and other conflict victims do not prioritise prosecutions. For instance, in the case of sexual violence, the social context of shame, victim blaming and silence; as well as lack of prior convictions reflecting futility of filing cases can dissuade victims from coming forward and seeking judicial redress (ICTJ Nepal and Martin Chautari 2017: 17). On how wartime sexual violence remain largely under the radar, a prominent women's rights activist in Bardiya commented:

How do you expect those issues to come out in a society where a woman's character is easily questioned, and she becomes ostracised for revealing those experiences? If something like that

²³ Interview conducted between February 22- 27, 2018 with conflict victims and local human rights activists in Gulariya.

²⁴ Conversation on April 18, 2018 with activist working for the rights of single women through an NGO in Kathmandu.

²⁵ Interview on February 24, 2018 with local human rights activists in Gulariya.

happened to me, I wouldn't say that to others myself. So, you see, there is no atmosphere for us to come out and say those issues out loud. During war-time, of course there have been so many cases of sexual violence. There was a case where a woman was gang raped and could not walk. Those stories have been told to us when we go to visit them. Army as well as police did that. Some policeman did that in their own police beat. We used to run education classes for girls. One girl came who was an ex-Maoist combatant. She said whenever army used to come looking for her brother, they would rape her in her home. They would do that every time they visited her home. It was intolerable for her. She felt either she should die, or she should join Maoists. What we realised was that many people had joined Maoists to become safe. Some of those women came back to their village with other combatants and tortured the landlords who had raped them. We work with women directly so, of course we know about those issues but the context in which we live is narrow-minded. So, those things are very difficult to come out.²⁶

5.1.4 Flow of aid, and relation between NGOs and victims' organisations

The flow of aid on issues related to transitional justice in Bardiya has declined in recent years although it was never high to begin with as the UN and other international bodies condemned the legal framework based on which the truth commissions were set up²⁷. However, one of the activists associated with local victims' committee argues that the aid from international donors would have been enough to make impact on the ground if the NGOs based in Kathmandu were willing to distribute the resources to victims directly, but that has not happened yet.

In recent times, much of the aid on transitional justice has focused on raising awareness about rights and establishing memorial parks. However, local activists collectively argue that greater focus should be on supporting economic livelihoods that go beyond giving the victims goats and cows to raise, or seeds for vegetable farming. The common sentiment among local activists, some of whom are also victims with family members missing during the armed conflict, is that victims are still treated as helpless and clueless. A long-time Tharu activist and conflict victim who is currently running a conflict victims' committee in Bardiya, said:

Usually, victims' organisations do not get funding directly. We are fighting with the state but at the same time, we also face mistrust from national level, Kathmandu based NGOs on our organisational capacity. We become united at the level of agenda but not at the level of resource mobilisation, why? NGOs talk about victim-centred justice within their policy framework, but they don't use the resources they have brought in the name of victims to promote victims' movement further... Everyone has to survive but if you are making us the basis of your survival, you should prioritise us, that's all we are saying. Those who have faced the issue should lead it forward. It is our issue but someone else is taking the leadership. We have felt the pain but someone else is crying on our behalf in Kathmandu. They are bringing funds for those who are hurt but we are not even aware about it. This gap must break. When we raise this issue, we are perceived negatively by NGOs.

²⁶ Interview in Gulariya conducted on February 26, 2018.

²⁷ Interview on February 20, 2018 with local human rights activist, who also used to be journalist during war-time.

They design the programme however they like and then invite us to participate and attend the event. This is tragic.²⁸

In the post-2006 period, many human rights I/NGOs came to Bardiya where they identified and trained various local actors-cum-victims, who went on to play a crucial role in mobilising people at ground level and getting the process of documentation done. Now that process is complete, and nationally transitional justice is still in a stagnant state, the vibrancy with which human rights I/NGOs operated in Bardiya has subsided. As a result, the local activists who have become trusted figures in their society and are relatively more in touch with everyday realities of victims, are trying to revive the agenda and negotiate for more involvement of victims themselves in the ongoing transitional justice discourse and practice. But they are struggling to get funding and resources. This shows how victims' organisations, which in some cases have grown due to external I/NGO support, are trying to be more than NGOs' target groups or beneficiaries by exercising their agency to claim for bigger space, resource and voice. These ongoing dynamics is also likely to determine how transitional justice mandate will develop in the future.

5.1.5 Conflict Victims' Organisations and the internal dynamics:

In 2006, Conflict Victims' Committee (CVC) was officially established in Bardiya headed by Bhagiram Chaudhary. It was the first victims' organisation that brought together victims from both sides, those affected by the state as well as Maoists during war-time. And it is still one of the most prominent victims' organisation in Nepal. At national level, various other organisations have been set up. For instance, in 2007, Conflict Victim Society for Justice (CVSJ) was established in Kathmandu, which now has branches in 40-45 districts. National Network of Families of the Disappeared and Missing (NEFAD) was established in 2009, with the initial vision of developing it as an umbrella network for victims' organisations, but the idea never materialised due to limited membership. Then, with financial support from UNDP's Transitional Justice Resource Centre, the Conflict Victims Common Platform (CVCP) was created, which now acts as an umbrella network for victims' organisations across Nepal including CVC in Bardiya²⁹.

Victims' organisations including those based at district level and the wider network such as NEFAD face the challenge of being representative of victims who are marginalised 'not only by their victimhood but by gender, caste and ethnicity' (Robbins and Bhandari 2012:9). Although majority of the victims are women and those from marginalised groups, the leadership of victims' groups predominantly remain male and 'high caste' (Robbins and Bhandari 2012:9). Within victims, division along class and political ideologies also exists, which further determines how victims perceive, interpret and understand justice. One of the activists heading victims' organisations further explains:

There is no division when it comes to seeking justice. But of course, even within victims, there is a tendency to sideline *sojho* (simple-minded) people by *chatur* (clever) people. Those affected by Maoists tend to be more educated and rich. When it comes to victims affected by the state, they

²⁸ Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 22, 2018.

²⁹ Interview with Bhagiram Chaudhary, chair of CVC on February 24, 2018.

usually tend to be poor villagers, voiceless and unable to debate. That's why, victims also interpret justice in different ways. Those who were affiliated to Maoists based on political beliefs and were affected, and those who did not have any affinity to Maoists but were victimised by the state, they tend to sit together in one cluster... Those victimised by Maoists say that Maoists were terrorists, robbers that's why they become suspicious that those victims who support Maoists could have also been involved in disappearances of their people. They tend to demand for jail sentence. What we can see is, the division among the victims is connected to class and political ideology.³⁰

Hence, the divisions that is seen within human rights NGOs and wider civil society in Nepal on whether justice should be perpetrator and prosecution-centred, or more about victims' everyday realities and their needs can also found within victims' organisations. Although the top-down discourse led by NGOs is very much in favour of prosecution styled justice, this discourse is likely to change with recent political developments in Nepal that has seen formation of the Left Alliance government comprising of CPN-M and CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist Leninist). The latter party with its large-scale influence in NGOs could well alter the current discourse. The local human rights activists interviewed are not optimistic that things will take turn for better, but they unanimously agree that with the new coalition government, there could be a possibility that there might be more work on increasing compensation package, but at the expense of and with the intention to silence the demands for truth and justice. The activists also complained how the transitional justice discourse had been whittled down to individual cases and grievances framed within a narrowly defined understanding of justice³¹. Tharu human rights activists in particular mentioned how the rise of Tharu politics in the post-war context came about due to historical oppression of Tharus as well as Maoists who championed emancipation, autonomy and representation among marginalised groups. However, the structural changes and social justice demanded by the Tharu political movements in the post-2006 context did not reflect in the transitional justice discourse, which largely tended to focus on individual cases of human rights violations during war-time. One of the Gulariya-based human rights activists who is also a conflict victim argued that although Tharu politics and transitional justice are intertwined, both the discourses are governed by different sets of actors, stakeholders and power politics resulting in different demands and priorities.³²

5.2 Governance

The seventh new Constitution of Nepal was promulgated by the Constituent Assembly on 20th September 2015. The new Constitution that came into effect after a ten year long armed conflict followed by seven years of political wrangling, was met with mixed reactions. The general sense of euphoria and relief was short-lived as widespread protests erupted in Tarai, subsequently resulting in an 'unofficial' economic blockade by India, which disrupted earthquake relief efforts in 2015 and brought Nepal's already fragile economy to standstill. After five months, the blockade was lifted in early February 2016. Despite a rocky start, Nepal has made headway in institutionalisation of federal democratic republican system as outlined in the new Constitution through series of elections in 2017. The elections for local

³⁰ Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 22, 2018.

³¹ Interviews conducted in Gulariya between August 20-27, 2018 .

³² Interview conducted in Gulariya on August 24, 2018.

governments were first conducted in three separate phases on 4 May, 28 June and 18 September. The 2017 local elections were followed by provincial and parliamentary elections conducted in two phases on 26 November and 7 December 2017. Despite continued controversies and discontentment regarding the 2015 Constitution particularly among minority groups, Nepal has completed an essential first step in institutionalisation of new federal mode of governance through election of political representatives.

5.2.1 Status of the local government in Gulariya

Within the wider political context, Bardiya has also witnessed a wave of new political actors such as the first female Deputy Mayor of Gulariya municipality. Gulariya is the headquarter town of Bardiya. Located near Nepal-India border, it is a major economic and educational hub of Bardiya. According to 2011 census, the total population of Gulariya was 55,747. Tharus constitute the highest share of the population at 12,629. Yadavs and Hill Bahuns make up the second and the third highest at 5341 and 5322 respectively, followed by Muslims, Malla has and Magars. Gulariya is one of the most culturally and religiously diverse areas within Bardiya.

The deputy mayor of Gulariya, when interviewed in February 2018, mentioned that there was still lack of clarity in terms of roles and responsibilities within and beyond local governments. Currently, they were operating based on frameworks outlined in the 2015 Constitution of Nepal and Local Government Act 2074. The local representatives had assumed different responsibilities, for instance, the deputy mayor was looking after the justice committee and tax/revenue collections³³. The local government was also responsible for formulating laws with the template and framework provided by Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development. However, there was lack of manpower with relevant expertise to do so³⁴. The need for training on legal/constitutional/governance related issues had also been felt throughout the local government³⁵, although there were few NGOs working in collaboration with local government on the issue³⁶.

The key challenges for the local governments, especially in Gulariya, were finding ways to increase tax revenues as they had responsibility to manage many sectors including education. At that moment, weekly local farm and animal markets in the town centre, local shops, land, waste management, brick factories and charges for cutting trees were the primary areas for revenue collection. The provincial government was yet to make laws and directives on resources and taxation, and local government was still waiting to gain further clarity in terms of how the revenues would be distributed across different tiers of the government³⁷. In Gulariya, the Municipality Council had approved an annual budget of Rs. 63 crores (6 million USD approx.), which included everything from development projects, services to salaries of all the employees and political representatives. The deputy mayor and senior civil servant interviewed in Gulariya did not

³³ Interview with deputy mayor of Gulariya municipality on February 27, 2018.

³⁴ Interview with a senior civil servant working for Gulariya municipality on February 26, 2018.

³⁵ Interview with deputy mayor of Gulariya municipality on February 27, 2018.

³⁶ Interview with director of local NGO based in Bardiya, who is involved in running trainings for locally elected representatives throughout Bardiya on February 26, 2018.

³⁷ Interview with deputy mayor of Gulariya municipality on February 27, 2018.

mention much about transitional justice and reparation for conflict victims in Bardiya. When asked about the transitional justice and post-war context in Bardiya, the senior civil servant who had been transferred to Bardiya a year ago commented³⁸ – ‘Everything is fine now. Victims and everyone have moved on.’ Both the interviewees, however, did mention about ‘Borderland area development project.’

5.2.2 Borderland area development project

The borderland area development project was targeted specifically at the settlements and communities living near Nepal-India border. There were seven wards³⁹ in Gulariya that directly shared their border with India. The local government had received a budget of Rs. 97 lakhs (93,000 USD approx.) for the development of those borderland areas from the federal government and the budget could not be used elsewhere. Out of the total budget, Rs. 65 lakhs had been allocated for development of roads, Rs. 14 lakhs for women’s skills development and rest for installation of solar lights in all targeted seven wards. The project first started in Bardiya in FY 2016/17⁴⁰. However, at the time of the fieldwork in February 2018, none of the work had started.

Commenting on the rationale behind this project, the deputy mayor of Gulariya municipality said:

Indian governments have been investing on its people near border areas so, people on that side get all the benefits but that’s not the case on our side. To improve that situation, we need to invest in those areas by focusing on electricity, education, skills development programmes. At ward-level, they also have a separate budget for those areas. One another factor is those in border areas, they do everything near and across the border. So, to prevent our resources from going across the border, we want to invest in those areas.⁴¹

5.2.3 Perception towards federal system and provincial demarcation

Social background such as caste/ethnicity play an important in how people perceive the new federal and provincial system of governance. Some of the human rights activists and legal advocate from Tharu background articulate current provincial demarcation as part of the state’s ‘divide and rule’ strategy. Regions with high population of Tharus have all been divided into different provinces as a result their collective strength as constituents has declined, which is expected to have implications in terms of addressing Tharus’ historical marginalisation as well as their political representation and rights.

The other narrative, which is largely vocalised by *Pahadi* (either by origin or marital connections) participants including deputy mayor (who is a *Madheshi* woman married to *Pahadi* man), civil servants, journalist and some members of citizens’ forum, is that province 5 where Bardiya is situated should have been merged with province 6 so, that the entire province would have Tarai, hills and mountains. They

³⁸ Interview conducted on February 26, 2018.

³⁹ A ward is the smallest administrative unit of governance.

⁴⁰ Interview with deputy mayor and senior civil servant at Gulariya municipality between February 26-27, 2018.

⁴¹ Interview with deputy mayor of Gulariya municipality on February 27, 2018.

are also dissatisfied about the marginal status of Bardiya within province 5, as not only is Bardiya at margins geographically, but the provincial state capital city is *Butwal*, situated in *Rupandehi*, which is still farther away so there is no difference whether the capital is Kathmandu or Butwal.

Besides caste/ethnicity, gender also plays an important role in how the new federal system is being perceived. For instance, the NGO working for sexual and gender minorities (SGM) highlighted cases of how some of their members were finding it difficult to receive citizenship as a third gender in Bardiya. There was an ongoing case where district office had asked a transgender applicant to present a medical report. Hence, the common perception among the NGO staff was that the provincial model was likely to create much more complications for them in the future as previously, in the centralised system, whatever decision was taken in the capital Kathmandu would be implemented at local level directly. But now, those decisions need to go through another added layer of provincial system, where they might have to explain and fight again for their guaranteed constitutional rights.

5.3 Bardiya National Park, buffer zone and conservation efforts

Bardiya National Park (BNP) is the largest protected area in the Tarai region of Nepal primarily situated in Bardiya but spreading across Surkhet and Banke districts. It is one of the most well-known sites in Nepal for wildlife sightings including Royal Bengal tiger, one-horned rhinoceros, Asian wild elephant, Gangetic dolphin, four-horned antelope and gharial crocodile. 56 species of mammals, 438 birds and 121 fishes as well as 839 species of flora can be found in the park that covers an area of 968 sq. km (BNP Office, 2018). Poaching and illegal trade of one-horned rhinoceros and Royal Bengal tiger remains one of the biggest challenges from an environmental conservation perspective. At the same time, one of the local journalists said,⁴² ‘the biggest challenge is balancing the relationship between the wild elephants and human settlement’. For those communities settled in buffer zone of BNP, wild elephants are perceived as the biggest threat as they have destroyed their houses and crops, and in some instances, killed people. One of the Kathmandu-based NGO staff⁴³ currently working in Bardiya mentioned how they were working on a project that helped farmers in buffer zone to cultivate essential oil plants, which were less likely to be eaten by wild animals. Although the project is currently focused on buffer zone, the threat of wild animals eating crops and destroying human communities can be found across Bardiya. With the increasing number of the state encouraged community forest initiatives and expansion of forests, it is important to consider how human settlements can co-exist within and near national parks, and ensure better and accessible compensation provisions for those affected.⁴⁴

Shradha Ghale’s 2017 study in Bardiya National Park shows how the enforcement of national park regulations has had severe implications on indigenous groups such as Sonaha, Raji, Kumal and Tharus as their livelihoods and cultures are deeply connected to forests and rivers. The issue is particularly severe for smaller indigenous groups such as Sonaha fishing community, who have lower population compared to Tharus, and they are yet to be recognised and enlisted under indigenous category despite having a

⁴² Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 21, 2018.

⁴³ Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 24, 2018.

⁴⁴ Interview with local people in Dalla and local journalists between February 19 – 27, 2018.

distinct language and culture (Ghale 2018: 8). Sonaha's traditional lifestyle centres around rivers and fishing. In 2008, due to pressure from Sonaha community and civil society activists, BNP officials issued fishing permits for Sonahas that allowed them to fish but within strict terms and conditions. Few months later, two Sonahas were arrested for their alleged involvement in rhino poaching and after that incident, BNP officials cancelled fishing permits of the entire Sonaha community (Ghale 2018: 10). Thus, the poor and marginalised groups have faced the highest cost for the conservation of environment and wildlife. In March 2010, there was also an incident reported where the army personnel stationed at BNP allegedly raped and killed 3 Dalit women accusing them of being poachers (The Himalayan Times, 2010). At Dalla village, one of the residents also recited an incident where army official stationed in BNP harassed some young women from the village and later some young men from Dalla cornered him in the forest and beat him up. The Tharu women resident said – 'We no longer live in fear like we used to.'

5.4 Border dynamics in the post-war period

Bardiya is connected to India through its southern border. Although Bardiya shares an open border with unrestricted movement of Nepali and Indian nationals, compared to *Rupaidiha* in *Nepalgunj*, there is no official border point for transfer of goods and third country nationals. Hence, all the large scale commercial transactions including migration to different parts of India take place through the borders of Nepalgunj. As for the border points in Bardiya such as *Murtiya* situated in Gulariya, it is usually those who have cross-border family relations in nearby areas who move across the border frequently. Furthermore, many other local inhabitants also travel to India to buy relatively cheaper goods such as vegetables, sugar, oil etc. for personal consumption. Every Saturdays and Tuesdays, *hatiyas*, meaning local market, take place in Gulariya town centre and many local business people also bring items from India through the *Murtiya* border, albeit in small scale using bicycles, to sell in the local market.⁴⁵ Nepali travelling to India for seasonal migration from across mid-western hills and Tarai use the official route via *Rupaidiha Nepalgunj* as it is easier to board trains from there and also because the fear of getting robbed and looted while travelling through Bardiya's dense forest is high⁴⁶.

Many NGO staff, local journalist and deputy mayor of Gulariya also mentioned that in the last few years, the open border in Bardiya has been increasingly used as a route for human trafficking, especially of women and girls from eastern districts of Nepal to India. The security personnel at *Murtiya* border claimed that there had been no such cases reported in their border checkpoint, although few women had been taken for questioning in suspicious cases. An NGO called *Maiti Nepal*, working against human trafficking had also set up its office near the *Murtiya* border point along with security personnel. No official data was found to verify the status of human trafficking in and through Bardiya. However, even if the official data is to be there, it is unlikely to be accurate as Bardiya shares an open border and in some parts, it is just dense forest spreading across Nepal and India so, it is difficult to track down illegal activities and all human movements. The presence of dense forest spreading across the border also provided a strategic advantage to CPN-M in transferring armed supplies from India and training guerrilla fighters during the war period⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Interviews with security personnels in Murtiya Nepal-India border, as well as local businesses on February 21, 2018.

⁴⁶ Interview with local journalist conducted in Gulariya on 24 February 2018.

⁴⁷ Interviews with local journalists and human rights activists based in Gulariya between February 19-27, 2018.

Few cases were also reported where Nepali travelling across the border through dense forests to collect grass, fodder and firewood were molested and arrested by Indian security forces⁴⁸.

Despite some of the negative impacts of cross-border relations such as trafficking, many people interviewed are in favour of officially opening the border in Bardiya, similar to that of Nepalgunj. Deputy Mayor of Gulariya said:

We are advocating to open the borders only then will we have development. Our former irrigation minister and parliamentarian Sanjay Kumar Gautam had also spoken to Indian Chief Minister about it. Chamber of Commerce has also been advocating for it. If *Murtiya* border is to open, then there will be lots of economic activities which will help in Gulariya's development. At the moment, all our money goes to India because it's cheaper out there. But if we were to open the border officially then we can bring goods from there and also, send our goods from here. We can collect taxes as well. There will be lots of possibilities. If this border opens up, then we will be directly connected to the highway as well. It will help not just Bardiya district but also the entire province number 6.⁴⁹

Political ideology and social backgrounds again appear to be determining factors in how receptive people are to opening the border. Local businesses and shopkeepers are for opening of the borders as they report that their businesses have declined recently as there is less flow of people in headquarter Gulariya as much of the state services are now available at local level. So, opening border with India is expected to inject new economic vibrancy to the district. However, there are also participants who advocate for tight border controls grounded on the vision of self-sufficient Nepal, without much consideration of the cross-border cultural ties that exists among large section of communities across Tarai belt including Bardiya. A *Pahadi*-origin local journalist and chair of citizens' forum said:

The country will never develop opening borders. We have to increase our production. At the moment, we are losing money to India. We don't agree on opening borders. We have to increase our production, consume locally and only then sell it outside...all the well-off people eat rice from India. Where does that leave our own crops? If we want to increase our productions and revenues, we must make the border tight.⁵⁰

Besides the economic and social implications of Nepal-India border dynamics, from a gender perspective, it must be noted that cross-border relations have been catalyst in helping SGM and third gender communities to come out and work together. Commenting on how there is high number of third gender community in Bardiya, one of the transgender woman and NGO staff from Tharu community, said:

Here, India is nearby, where there is a big *hijra* community. Before starting this office, many people from here would go and join the *hijra* community there. Within Tharu community, there is a tradition of men dressing up as women to dance during *Dashai* festival. Usually, a guy wouldn't

⁴⁸ Interview with local NGO staff and journalist in Gulariya between February 19-27, 2018.

⁴⁹ Interview with deputy mayor of Gulariya municipality on February 27, 2018.

⁵⁰ Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 28, 2018.

be interested in becoming a woman. But our friends are very interested in becoming women so, the festival would provide the opportunity to do so. People would call them *nachaniyas*. In case of *Pahadis*, *Muslims* and *Madheshis* such kind of culture is not there so, it is difficult for them to come out.⁵¹

Thus, the Nepal-India border in Bardiya, despite not being an official border point, has played and continues to play an important role in shaping the districts socio-cultural and economic dynamics.

Conclusion

In media, Bardiya is commonly portrayed as the primary district in relation to war-time enforced disappearances. This paper shows that while the everyday sufferings of conflict victims are undeniable realities of Bardiya, it is also important to understand that Bardiya is not an ahistorical place, which usually tends to be forgotten in contemporary public discourse about the district. There is a complex history behind how the socio-economic and political dimensions have developed in Bardiya, particularly over the last two centuries, and how those historical processes have shaped the war-time experiences of the district as well as its post-war transitional processes. Extreme land inequalities fostered under Hindu ruling elites, indigenous groups such as Tharus' interaction with the state and its land grant beneficiaries, emergence of bonded labour system and redefining of indigenous groups' tradition and culture all need to be considered to understand Bardiya in contemporary times. As mentioned in the beginning, rather than delve into specific issues, this paper provides a broad overview of various facets of Bardiya. This paper can be used as a reference to gain a general understanding of the district to support further and in-depth research.

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⁵¹ Interview conducted in Gulariya on February 22, 2018.

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DISTRICT MAPPING OF DOLPO

Chapter 2

Continuity and Transformations in Northern Borderlands: A Study of Contemporary Dolpo

Sujeet Karn

Introduction

This district mapping of Dolpo is an attempt to illustrate the stories of continuity and transformations of the people, their adaptations to outsiders, and realignments of economic and political engagements that had taken place since the second half of the 20th century¹. More specifically this paper explores the ways in which 1990s democratic transformations are negotiated in the district and how after 2007 war to peace transitions period, Dolpo has featured in both local as well as central political spaces.

The geography of Dolpo has been widely described as 'the space – exotic'². The arid landscape with gray rocks and sandy slopes standing like deserted barren mountains in high Himalayas of Nepal is in a continuous transition since 1959³. The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 somewhat changed the border dynamics of Dolpa with Tibet. The external geo-political motives ultimately transformed the patterns of

¹ In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century upper Dolpo was administered by the Kathmandu through first with Hindu Jumla authorities but with traditional ties also to the Tibetan Buddhist regions of upper Dolpo and later through the Buddhists Rajas of Mustang. Also for a number of years before his death in 1963, Niyama Tshering of upper Dolpo controlled the region informally and settled disputes in the region without any official political or religious title and status. This suggests that until late 1960s upper Dolpo largely enjoyed autonomous power to govern locally. Ref. James F. Fisher (1987) for details on region's greater autonomy.

² Dolpa is viewed exotic because of its fascinating labyrinth of glacial valleys, rugged ridges and snowcapped mountains that are placed between Gautam Himal (Sisne) in the North and South and Dhulagiri Himal (Kanjiroba) in the South. However, expression of exotic Dolpo is produced mainly through travelogue diaries written by several tourists including Karna Sakya who wrote *Dolpo: The World behind the Himalayas* (Sakya 2013[1974]) and *Dolpo: the Hidden Paradise – a Journey to the Endangered Sanctuary of the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal* (Sakya 2007). Further a greater emphasis is put by James F. Fisher (1987).

³ In the case of Limi, Humla, Hovden points out that the former kingdoms of Ngari became part of central Tibetan administration after the fall of the Guge (Gu ge) Kingdom in the seventh century, whereas Limi and other areas that had been ruled by the former Jumla kingdom were incorporated into Nepal after the military expansion of the Gorkhas at the end of the eighteenth century. Limi maintained strong relationships with the Tibetan administrations and monasteries, and a system of dual or perhaps rather multiple taxations continued until the Sino Nepali border treaty of 1961. Similar tradition existed in Dolpa as well and it was during this time that Dolpo experienced changes in trade relations with Tibet (see Hovden 2013 and Goldstein 1974: 261).

engagement of the people in the region. Due to the complications in Chinese legal creations to govern Tibet, cross border animal husbandry and trade practices with Nepal saw a change with new restrictions placed. Thus change occurred in livestock production and economic engagements of the people in Dolpo whereas previously Tibetan plateau was used as grass lands for Nepalese animal herders.⁴ This has contributed in shortage of pasture land and hence has adversely influenced the economic gain through animal rearing. In the changed context, the people of Dolpo, especially of upper Dolpo were pushed to explore their positions in the Nepali nation state and governance. This was contrary to the experiences and practices of a culturally Tibetan region of western Nepal, their shared language, religious and cultural practices, history, and life style unique from the rest of the people in the country. Since 1970s, however programs and policies pursued by government and non-government actors has also played a critical role in shaping the economic, political, and social life of the people in this region.

Contested boundaries and basic amenities within district geography

Dolpo, seen as the rooftop of human habitat (altitude of 4100 m.), is located in northwestern Nepal. According to the political and administrative division of Nepal, Dolpo is one of the largest districts, covering 5.36% (7889 sq. k.m.) of country's total landmass. Earlier it was placed under the Mid-Western Development Region and Karnali Zone that has been restructured after 2015 constitution. In the new federal structure, Dolpo comes under province no. 6. In the previous administrative structure, the district was divided into 23 Village Development Committees (VDCs) and 207 wards.⁵ Now this structure has been transformed into 2 urban (Thuli Bheri and Tripurasundari) and six rural (Dolpo Buddha, She Phoksundo, Jagdula, Mudkechula, Kaike and Charka) municipalities⁶. The district borders with Tibet Autonomous Region (China) on the North and North-East, Jumla and Mugu districts of Karnali on the west Jajarkot, Rukum and Myagdi on the South, and Mustang on the East. Moreover geographically the district is divided into two parts as Upper (Bhot Chhetra) - Northern-side and Lower Dolpo - Southern side. Dolpo has about 7466 total household numbers with the lowest population density of 5 persons per square kilometer. The total population of Dolpo is around 36,700 which include 18,238 (49.69%) male and 18,462 (50.31%) female population. However, it is estimated that the population of Dolpo will double in 33 years, if the present annual population growth rate remains on i.e. 2.17 (CBS 2014).

Further, it is evident from the district level data that everyday hardship in Dolpo is extreme. Data suggests that in Dolpo, 89.01% of households use firewood as means of fuel for cooking and households without toilets facility consists of 49.25%. Only 64.84% of households have piped water. About 23.03% of the

⁴ Dolpo's residents refer to this entire region as the area bounded by the Tibetan Plateau (to the north) that was previously a garaging field for the animal.

⁵ The structure of 75 districts and 14 zonal division of Nepal came during Panchayat regime in 1961. The borders of Dolpa were redrawn and it was under administration of Dhaulagiri zone initially. The district headquarters called Tarakot but all the administrative offices were created in Baglung and none of the officials appeared in Dolpo before 1963. In Devnagari, especially in the public book its name is pronounced as Dolpa but to maintain its past origin as discussed by Snellgrove and other British writers as well as how people of upper Dolpa call it, in this paper I have used Dolpo instead of Dolpa. For more detail see Hirachan 2064v.s.

⁶ <http://www.mofald.gov.np/en/nepal-nagarpalika-gaupalika-list>. Ministry of Federal affairs and General Administration, Government of Nepal, Final district 1-75 corrected for *Rajpatra*, Government of Nepal, pp. 334-338; accessed on March 28, 2018.

households have access to electricity, 50.49% households have solar power for lighting (CBS 2014). If we combine the percentage of electricity and solar facility, it shows nearly 75% household have smokeless energy for lighting but the reality is different because of double facility.

Further, the Human Development Index (HDI) score for Nepal in 2011 was 0.458, the lowest ranking among the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Within this calculation Dolpo featured as one of the deprived districts of Nepal in terms all indicators of HDI. Dolpo scored 0.401 for HDI and 44.56 for Human Poverty Index (HPI) in 2011. Economically active population is around 17,932 (48.89%) with the (labor) production of Rs. 86,910.1 which counts gross domestic product (GDP) for Rs 1,558.5 million in Dolpa (Sharma et.al. 2014).

However, from the field data collected during 2016 and 2017, it appears that although for administrative purposes Dolpo is divided into two regions but for people of the district there is a clear demarcation of geography into three parts. This varies with lower part mainly inhabited by Khas-Aarya, and Dalit groups, the middle part inhabited by Magars largely with other janjatis and migrants Khas-Aryas from the lower part of the district and upper Dolpo mainly of 'bhot' people. This is also evident in the contemporary politics where people of the middle part of the Dolpo has relatively greater control over the politics of the district and are comparatively better off in terms of economic access and livelihood means. This is possible also due to their greater accessibility with district headquarter and only airport in the district⁷. The present district member of National Parliament (MP) too belongs to the same middle part (geography) and other influential district level leaders come from the same reason⁸.

Thus, it is clear that the boundaries are only partly ecological and determined in part by the social structure. Hence, internal boundaries are functional and not only remarketed administratively in terms of higher and lower topography and high glacial, and relatively high and low mountain passes but also kinship renegotiations and its influence to social structure has contributed to a greater extent. Moreover, from the field observations it emerges that boundaries are delineated in respect to the influence that people have over the 'others' in terms of living in a particular space within the district. These boundaries are not only socio-cultural in the context of the perennial presence of either Buddhist or Hindu culture or ecological but also socio - political and economic in nature. And this is finally governed by the power dynamics and designed according to centre-periphery relationships within the district where accessibility to district centre puts the population of the nearby areas in an advantaged situation. Ultimately these distinctions within district point to the ongoing struggle of power among various groups who are differently located in the district.

⁷ Above argued explanations are based on the interviews conducted in the district and the observations made during the fieldwork that was conducted twice between 2016 and 2018.

⁸ Also district secretary of Congress party belong to the same region called Sahartara. Both UML and Congress leaders of the district come from the same village.

Agricultural production: a means of livelihood

Agricultural production and livelihood means also differ within these three colloquially explored geographical boundaries. All landmass of the district comprises of small valleys are located next to the river beds in the lower part. Middle part has relatively higher altitude than the lower part, with elevation ranging from 1525 to 2300 metres. Higher glacial topography includes mountains, harsh rocky and out-of-the-way with elevation ranges from 2400 to 7754 meters from sea level with extreme cold temperature. Therefore people's survival strategies include not only agriculture but also animal husbandry and trade. However, traditional agricultural system of Dolpo employs almost 95% of the total population (DDC 2015). The most important crops cultivated are maize, potato, millet, wheat and buckwheat, barely and high altitude rice. Among cereal crops, maize and barley are major in terms of large area coverage of agricultural land. Millet and barley are commonly grown. Paddy occupies lowest portion of cultivated area due to the lack of irrigation facilities in the low land. *Uwa*, *Chino*, *Kaguno* (types of buckwheat) are other crops grown in the district (Shah et.al. 1981). Most recently, especially after 2007 development of tourism in some upper parts of the district is also contributing to local trade and economy and further connecting people continuously to the outside world.

Herbs: means of livelihood in Dolpo

Dolpo is also considered a natural storehouse of herbs (medicinal plants). The major and most sought after herbs in Dolpo are *Yarsagumba*, *Jatamasi*, *Katuki*, *Sugandhwal*, *Pakhanvedh*, *Gucci Chyau* (mushroom), Seabuckthorn. Gucci Chyau is harvested during *Falgun-Chait* (February-April). These plants are in demand in the international market and linked with the livelihood means of Dolpo people. Collection of herbs is an important way of sustaining life for Dolaplis. *Yarsagumba*, *Jatamasi* and *Katuki* are economically the most important. Local herb traders argue that around 10/20 quintal of herbs like *Bhutle*, *Jatamashi* are collected under the permit of Forest Department is exported every year from Dolpo. Herbs are the major source of livelihood for people in Dolpo, but they have not been able to sustain the living standard of the people⁹.

Due to its arid climate throughout the year, it is hard to manually do farming hence in addition to farming in lower valleys, naturally grown herbal products contribute to livelihoods. Locally, people claimed that it was a drought like situation in Dolpo and Karnali from 2011 to 2014. It was only since 2015 that there has been enough rainfall for harvesting. During the herb harvesting season, all able-bodied members of families move to the '*lek*' (high passes) to pick *yarsagumba*. On an average, it was suggested that one person can collect from 150-200 *yarsagumbas* a day. Before the discovery of yarcha the lifestyle of the people was completely different. The men would travel in and around the villages for trade, or to look for work as porters. Women would stay in home and tend to the fields and cattle. However at present only one or two members stay back in the house, depending on how much field and cattle they possess. Otherwise everybody

⁹ This information is presented based on the interview conducted on May 12, 2016 in Dunai with Ram Bichari Thakur, DFO of Dolpa.

else will go to pick up *yacha* and travel to the *lek* and stay there for a month or two. The money they get after selling *yarcha* enables them to sustain their livelihoods for the rest of the year.

Olives, apples, walnuts, apricots etc¹⁰ grow in the Southern part of Dolpo. Khas (*Khasan*) Nepali speaking (predominantly Hindu) villagers do farming in the Southern part of Dolpo. People who live in the vast, high, cold and dry plateaus with thin population from northern part of Dolpo do farming and trade within the Buddhist cultural tradition. Culturally these are Tibetan enclaves but with Nepalese citizenship and known as *Bhotias* (Fisher 1987). However, 'Bhote'¹¹ is a word which has a derogatory connotation.

Animal husbandry is one of the important economic activities, with the number of animals owned indicating wealth, and a status of a family. Due to harsh topographical and climatic conditions in some parts of Dolpo, livestock remain the main means to livelihoods, especially in the high altitude regions. Even in the crops growing areas livestock is a para-essential thing. Domestic animals include cows, chauries/yaks, buffalos, sheep-goat and horses which are used for wool, milk, meat, skins, plow the land, manures production, and carry loads. The problems related to the advancement of livestock are related to lack of pasture land, veterinary facilities and market.

Besides livestock and farmland, the locals engage in small-scale trade as well. Mainly medicinal herbs and plants are sold out from Dolpo. *Radi-Pakhi* (carpets, blankets made of wool), goats, sheeps and apples are goods that people export in limited volume. Daily use goods and other necessities are imported from Nepalgunj, Sukhet, Dang, Rukum, Jajarkot, Jomsom, Mustang, Bhairahawa, Baglung, Pokhara and seasonally from Tibet depending upon the feasibility. Main marketing centers are Dunai (headquarters) and Juphal (airport center). While observing the markets and learning from the people it appears that the pattern of trading is not yet institutionalized and structured. Use of social network and traditional practices are prevalent.

As shown in the study of Fisher's (1987), the transaction of goods circuit was a bridging tool to maintain relationship between the lower and upper Dolpo¹². The Yak caravans transported grain to Tibet during the summer and returned with salt to barter in the middle hills of Nepal. The salt was then exchanged in lower Dolpo for millet and barley. The salt carried on sheep, goats, or horses down to the Southern hills to trade it for rice and maize in winter (Gurung 1979). "Over a span of fifty years, due to political and

¹⁰ 8 distilleries have been registered as industry to produce alcohol based on produced fruits in the District (DDC 2015).

¹¹ The word 'bhote' has different interpretation for different people. Data from the field suggests that especially when we start from Lahan, the beginning of Dolpa the lower part in the South, is now connected with the road. The motorable track was cleared in 2018 that is following from Rukum. The people of this area call the people of Sahartara 'Bhote' that is located in the middle part of Dolpo. However when one gets to Sahartara region, people of the area call 'Dho- Tarap' (upper Dolpo) people 'Bhote'. Similarly when one interacts with the people of 'Dho-Tarap', for them 'Bhotes' are the people from 'Tibet' and of 'Saldang'. However they are called 'Tibetan Bhotes'. The word 'Bhote' is contested also because of the divided boundaries that exist within the district between different groups who live at various altitudes and ecology which is contrasting from the administrative explanation as upper and lower Dolpo.

¹² The upper part of Dolpa is also known as Dolpo which is part of Dolpa district. In different books, reports, articles etc. especially literatures produced in English language the terms Dolpa and Dolpo is used more or less arbitrarily. However, there is a difference in meaning. Dolpo is formed by the lower valleys of Suligad, Thuli Bheri and Jagdulla rivers, Tichu-rong valley and the Dolpo region (Bezemer 2009). However for the purpose of this paper instead of Dolpa, Dolpo is used.

economic changes and Chinese restrictions on across the border" (Maksymowicz 2014: 30), this barter trading system is transformed. The people of Dolpo now get salt from other regions of Nepal. This has created a new economic order where goods are normally transported from the low land of Nepal and seasonally people from upper Dolpo collect food items from Tibet. The change in previously existed trading system has distorted the chain of ongoing barter system and has led to a new form of survivability. A trend to seek support from the Nepali state has thus increased in the recent past, and a quest for the search for alternative livelihood means has emerged which has contributed to internal migration.

Internal winter migration

In terms of migration, two forms can be seen -- permanent and temporary. People who have earned economic capital have a tendency to migrate permanently towards Kathmandu, Nepalgunj, Surkhet or city areas. However, temporary migration happens in Dolpo every winter due to harsh climate conditions where most of the villages in upper Dolpo get covered with snow. Because this makes life harder, people migrate from north to south region of Dolpo in search of jobs in order to survive. There is a shift in migration pattern as well, whereas before insurgency people mainly migrated to lowlands and it was restricted to lower Dolpo. But after peace process, this trend has changed mainly to Kathmandu and nearby big cities including Pokhara and Nepalgunj. Moreover, before the Maoist insurgency, migration was mostly limited to inter-VDCs one. An informant Dujum Lama of Mukot, also a Lama by profession, and a United CPN Maoists sympathizer argued:

From upper part only those who have enough money or kin in Dunai, they come down. Otherwise everything is too expensive. People with enough money will go to Kathmandu for a month or two. Last year there were a good number of families who moved from Mukot for the winter. Not so much this year because people didn't get good value of Yarsagumba. This year 20 families might have moved from here. Most people go to Kathmandu. Some go and stay with their relatives. Some rent flats. Mostly people of Dho and Taksera have a house in Kathmandu.¹³

Since the period of insurgency to present, the destination of the temporary migration has changed. This shift is mainly motivated for '*Jado katauna*' - spend winter and '*Sahar Bazar Ghumna*' - move around cities. It is now possible because of two reasons. In the present context collection of Yarchaguma and its trade has picked up substantially and has contributed to people's earning. And second, it was Maoist insurgency which pushed people to migrate outside the village areas and hence cities were seen as a safe destination. However, now migration is also about spending money and experiencing modern consumer facilities of the global world while being in big cities.

Food (in)security and Dolpo

Food insecurity has been a concern for the people in Dolpa, and it has not improved substantially until now. However, there has been progress in terms of access to rice. In Dolpa, there are five depots of food

¹³ An Interview was conducted with Dujum Lama of Mukot in Dunai on November 26, 2016.

supply, one each in the VDCs now wards (but place is the same) - Dunai, Juphal, Kaigaun, Sarmi, and Liku from where food grains especially rice and salt is supplied to the people by the Nepal Food Corporation (NFC). In the VDCs of Dunai and Juphal, NFC distributes rice as per the price rate of Nepalgunj of which the transport cost from Nepalgunj is bore by NFC itself. At the time of the research the price of iodine salt in the market was Rs. 90/kg while Salt Trading Corporation (STC) provided for the price of Rs. 9/kg. In some of the villages, rice distribution is done under the supervision of the VDC secretary and the members of political parties. The price of rice distributed by NFC was five rupees per kg more to the government employees compared to the local people. Ration card for the food distribution is provided to the people by the VDC. If the person is a dalit, the volume of rice s/he is provided with is 5 kg a month while people from other caste the quota is 4 kg of rice a month. If in case anyone demands for extra rice (in the events like death rituals, marriage, pujas), they are provided 1 *kattha* (equivalent to 30 kgs) of rice as permitted by the CDO under the recommendation of the VDC Secretary. The government employees are also provided with ration card by their concerned office. NFC provides food grains only to the people from Dolpa. However from the informants it was learned that people (mostly the rich ones) sell the rice distributed by NFC and buy better rice available in the market. NFC is unable to supply rice as per the local demand. Of the total additional rice 30,000 quintal is allocated to Karnali, and 8000 quintal of additional rice for Dolpo. The present volume of rice that is being distributed in upper Dolpo was 4,500 quintal and to lower Dolpa it was 12/15,000 quintal¹⁴. An informant¹⁵ from Saldang shared his ordeal to collect rice to ensure survival in the Upper Dolpo of Saldang:

Previously we barely had rice in our meal. Even if we walked all the way from our village in Upper Dolpa, we would get around 5 kgs of rice. Even if we got more, we wouldn't be able to take it all the way up. It was difficult for us. Former MP Nar Bahadur Budathoki (father of Nagendra Budhathoki) was the one who lobbied that Bhotias should also get rice and arranged for rice to be delivered at various borders. Rice is transported and dropped off in Asar and we go pick it up in Shrawan when the border opens. Other times, we can't get across. For one kg of rice we pay around Rs. 50. Until two years ago, we had to pay Rs. 35-40. For a packet of salt we pay Rs. 9. For a quintal, it costs Rs. 5051. We pay the money to the contractor. Until now, Parliamentarian Dhan Bahadur Budha has been doing this. We pay him and he pays to the concerned sources. Now rice is transported to two borders - Kyato and Marim. Nearby villagers come to these points with their yaks and horses and take their share of rice. It is much easier now compared to the past when we had to go to Dunai to collect rice,

Education in Dolpo

According to CBS (2014) 54.15% of the people from Dolpo are literate whereas for women the literacy rate is around 40.62%. A total of 216 (2 Campus, 5 Higher Secondary, 9 Secondary, 14 Lower Secondary, 87 Primary School, Children Development Centre School based 92 and 6 based on Community, and a

¹⁴ Above presented information is extracted from the interviews conducted on May 10 & 11, 2016 with Jeevan Prasad Dulal, CDO of Dolpa and NFC official at Dunai.

¹⁵ An interview was conducted with Dhunj Lama of Saldang during September/October 2016 in Dunai.

Technical School) formal educational institutions are in the district in order to increase/improve literacy and build skilled manpower (DDC 2015). However, quality education has proven to be a distant dream. People in the district argue that educational institutions in the district are not able to provide effective education due to a variety of reasons. Study conducted in Dolpo examined the extent and causes of student and teacher absenteeism. Data showed that approximately 83 school-days are lost each year due to absenteeism that is linked to seasonal events. This is nearly 38 per cent lower than the government standard of 220 school-days per year. This does not include school-days lost for non-seasonal factors (Teachers' Union of Nepal 2010).

Although women contribute substantially in family income mainly through involvement in agricultural and household activities, they argue that they live in a male dominated society. Most of the women in Dolpo do not have large inputs in decision making. This is comparatively different in upper, lower and middle part of Dolpo. However, status of women appears relatively encouraging in middle and upper Dolpo where female members often take stock of running business and trading through tent houses.

Particularly in the lower part of Dolpo many families still think that education for girls is less important than for men, especially due to the reason that after the marriage a girl will go to live with the other family. This seems to be a factor in early marriage, cases of school dropouts, and absenteeism. This appears further aggravating in traditionally poor families, followed by Dalits. It was observed that children from Dalit households frequently get engaged in agriculture or livestock-raising that keeps them far from schools. Nevertheless things have improved in the education scenario in the recent past but there are challenges.

Foreign investments in schools in upper Dolpo

Out of the 87 primary schools in the district, four are located in Upper Dolpo. The first school that was established in Upper Dolpo was the Crystal Mountain School in Dho Tarap. It was established in 1994 and Saldang School was established in 1999. The schools in Bhijer and Tinje were established in 2002. The headmaster of Crystal Mountain School explained:

I have been teaching at this school for the past 18 years. Educational context of the place was very difficult at the beginning. At that time people of this place didn't have understanding of modern education. There was no such thing as educated in this place. Some of them continued Lama training. This School was established in 1994 in support from foreigner. Government School was already there. Situation of government school is the same always. Many teachers used to come but they did not stay longer, they used to come and go. Previous head sir Kedar brought a foreign project here. After this we were able to manage stationary for every student. It helped in establishing a perspective that one should take education. A French national named Marie Glare helped us. She felt sympathetic towards us. She approached. Now they fund us through collecting funds from many sponsors. They collect €10 to €15 and send it here. Situation I think has changed a lot from then and now. This change is not only in education but also in terms of cleaning, hygiene, health and everything. Now students graduated from this school are working as a private HA, these students

are our production, and one is already working here. I taught them from nursery and KG and now they study in bachelor, it's like this.¹⁶

oreigners trust Bhotes because they see their religion and culture peaceful. But this seems to have changed after the advent of Yarcha collection and its trade. Further, it was the movie Caravan that eventually highlighted the plight of people and the exotic landscape of Upper Dolpo to the rest of the world. During Yarchagumba season, schools are closed for 15 days. Children along with their families move to the '*lek*' to collect the herb. Then harsh winter obstructs mobility from late September. Schools get closed in November and continue until April next year. Due to the heavy snow fall local teachers as well as many household members leave the village. At this point much cannot be done. The air is still too cold for children to learn properly.

In terms of awareness towards education a substantial improvement is seen in Upper Dolpo. Further an informant, Tashi Dhondup of Saldang, also a teacher at Saldang School for 14 years and now into social work (party politics) said:

When I started teaching, people in Upper Dolpo weren't educated. They didn't see the importance of sending their children to school. They viewed their children to be fit to study Lama than to modern education. They were very stagnant and immobile. Their life was spent in the Bhot only. I also went to India to study Lama for 8 years. I studied Buddhist Philosophy. Even if teachers came, parents would not send their children to school. I struggled when I went to India. I realized how important it was to learn to communicate properly- in other languages - English, Nepali or whatever. After I came back, my brother Karma Dhondup and I requested a German lady Adelaide Dhonges for support to run the school in Saldang. The Saldang School was established in the Panchayat regime but there were no teachers and so it was as good as closed. I revived it. This German lady supported us with NRs. 1 Lakh. My salary was NRs. 5,000. We introduced modern education and the locals said we had to incorporate Gumba Education (Tibetan language classes) as well. So we started teaching Tibetan as well. We were provided two government teachers. Initially we taught only four subjects in the school that was Bhot bhasa, Nepali, Mathematics, and English. There were challenges. Parents stopped sending their children saying modern education did not guarantee jobs for their children. Lamas had more opportunities to travel far and abroad and make more money. It also compromised with our Buddhist teachings. But that changed later. We have now many students who are doctors and engineers. When I proposed to reopen the school in Saldang, Dunai's administration said we should try to bring the students to the HQ. But our sponsors did not agree. Hence we continued school and taught in Saldang until the season allowed us in a particular year. The tourists who came to Upper Dolpo saw the situation and viewed education a necessity. Some of them are helping us with sponsorship program..¹⁷

This suggests an increasing trend of educational development in Dolpo in general and upper Dolpo in particular. At present there are schools with teachers. Yet this is not enough and more schools and teachers

¹⁶ Interview conducted with the headmaster on August 6, 2017.

¹⁷ Interview conducted with Tashi Dhondup in Dunai on December 1, 2016.

are required. There is a new boarding school in Sherri (Mukot) run by a group of French. Two government staff and two teachers employed by the project are running the school. But there is still a lot that need to be done to improve the educational status in the district.

Accessibility

6.1 Transportation

Dolpo doesn't have roads that connect the district with other surrounding districts. The options for reaching to Dolpo are either by foot, by plane or by animal transportation. The only direct access to Dolpo is to get there by air to Juphal¹⁸ that is a 3 hours walk from the district headquarters of Dunai. Juphal to Dunai road track has been cleared which reduces half an hour time distance than walking. Twin-attar (chopper) planes fly from Nepalgunj or Surkhet – nearest big city to Dolpo in the Western Tarai of Nepal which takes around a quarter of hour to get there. Unfortunately flights are often cancelled due to bad weather conditions such as wind. And hence most of the flights to Dolpo take off before 10 AM. This ultimately limits the number of flights to Dolpo and hence an added stress to access flight tickets for general public.

Dolpo is known for animals' caravans, such as yak, mule, horse are used to carry loads/daily usage goods from one place to another within and outside district. Horses are still the means of transportation in upper Dolpo. Recently, after the initiation of construction of road in the lower part of the district for transportation of goods to the district headquarter and other places, 'Khachar' (Donkeys) are being used. In the lower Dolpo, this is seen as a good means of earning money while transporting goods to the remote areas. However in the advent of road construction the means of transportation of goods will ultimately change in near future.

Tusare-Charka (South-West neighbor district Rukum to Northern VDC neighbor to Tibet) *Goreto*- footpath was initiated its construction in 1964, which is considered as the main pathway to connect inter-villages of Dolpo and to exit out from the district to other districts of Nepal¹⁹. However, there are other pathways to exit from the district - passes through *Bhalu Lek* (hill) or through *Maure Lekh* toward Jumla (south-west)²⁰; passes through *Thange Lekh*, *Dwari Lekh* or *Kulda Lekh* toward Rukum (south-east); passes through *Thange*, *Phagune Lekh* and *Dhorpatan* toward Magdi (south-east); passes through Chharka VDC toward Mustang (north-east) and passes through Dhaldong Lekh, Yala Lekh and Chyarkola Lekh toward Mugu (north-west) - are not regular. North side is connected to Tibet, with two passes - *Morimla* from Tinje VDC and *Kyahtto* from Saldang VDC which is open once in a year in the month of August.

¹⁸ The Juphal airport was started in 1976 and another airport is constructed in the district which is called Masine Chaur airport located in Pahada VDC. Few flights had been tested in 2016. In 1965, for the first time the aircraft project was initiated in Dolpo which is engineered by Swiss Mission with budget estimation of NRs 2500 crores. The release of budget was 2300 by the Disitric Panchayat Offices but the total budget spent was only 500 crores (Hirachan 2064 v.s.).

¹⁹ The motor-able road to connect Dolpo district has planned and started to construct with reference of the *Goreto*. The track is now opened till the border and small vehicle run since 2016.

²⁰ It was main pathway at the era of Rana regime (Hirachan 2064 v.s.).

6.2 Jajarkot-Dolpo Road Project

Jajarkot-Dolpo road section is a part of Bheri corridor and it is under construction. This corridor is the shortest route (around four and half hundred kilometer distance) to connect two neighboring countries India and China. The construction of road at this section started in 2064 BS (2008). The distance for construction of road in the section is 117.7 km from Pasagadh, Jajarkot from where a zero point begins. Originally it was planned from Chaurjahari, Rukum with the section called Devasthal Kainidanda Chaurjahari-Dolpo. However due to the political interference original road construction plan changed its course and now continues from Jajarkot. The 78 km of track from zero points has been cleared and now it is open for small jeep and tractor movements. This track finally connected to the border of Dolpo called Tribeni (Junction of two rivers and a stream or border for three districts - Dolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot) in July 2017. From Tribeni to Khadang, a 4 kilometer stretch has now been cleared to Dolpa.²¹ Although this plan for road construction was envisioned in the 1960s but to implement on the ground it took until 2008 when finally construction work started. Further due to local conflict and political maneuvering for track to follow its course affected construction. Due to this conflict, project was transferred to Nepal Army (NA) and they had started work from Dolpa (Supani in plain area) to resolve conflict but that was not possible and rational. Hence the road construction is taking its momentum from Triveni itself.

6.3 Health Service

There are 1 hospital with 15 beds, 14 health posts, 9 sub-health posts and 69 immunization clinics in order to provide health service to the inhabitants of the district. However, these existing health posts were found not to have served people satisfactorily due to frequent absenteeism of the staffs, non-availability of medicine, lack of doctors (skill manpower beyond basic need), and delay appointment for the vacant post.

6.4 Communication

Due to geographical remoteness, Dolpo has very few modern amenities. Until today telephone service is limited to a few small areas in and around headquarters of Dunai. Mobile phone services have been started in almost all VDCs of district since 2007. It shows mobile communications is available throughout the district but only 44.45% households have proper access to mobile facility and among them a large number mobile phone users express deep dissatisfaction on weak network system. Very few households have access to a radio. 38.17% households have radio facility for tuning national issues broadcasted from Radio Nepal in Amplitude Modulation. Two local radios are established in Frequency Modulation popularly known as FM Radio in the district. One is situated in headquarter Dunai, and is almost 6 years old, with limited catch up area in and around of Dunai. Another is located in Juphal, but still in testing phase. The postal service is rendered as an effective means of communication.

²¹ During the field work in September – October 2017, road work was in progress at several patches. Contractors were seen active in clearing up the track. It was assumed that by the end of April 2018 at least road connection would reach to Khadang of Dolpo. And Finally in September 2018 Khadang got connected.

Natural and cultural heritage

Shey Phoksumdo National Park (SPNP) is the largest and only trans-Himalayan national park in Nepal with an area of 3555 sq. km which is 45% of the area of Dolpo. SPNP was formally incorporated in gazette on August 6 1984 and is covered under (a) the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 2029 (1973) which provides a legal basis for the preservation of the flora and fauna by the Royal Nepal Army; and (b) the Himalayan National Parks Regulation of 2036 (1979) which provides free entry, public right of way and limited use of park resources for the local community as long as it does not have a detrimental effect on the natural environment. Since its creation in 1981, it has been linked to an extensive string of protected areas stretching along the Himalayan range (Hay-Edie 2001: 56). It was proposed for the declaration of a World Heritage site by the government of Nepal for its outstanding natural diversity of global importance.

Phoksundo Lake (*Rigma-Daha*), lies within the SPNP, one of the centre of attraction in Dolpo. The deepest lake with the depth of 650 meters is said to be animal free lake due to excessively cold water. Many other lakes are situated in Dolpo such as Jagadalla Lake in Kaigaun VDC, Sundaha in Dunai VDC, Dudhkunda and Suk-Daha in Rimi VDC etc. These lakes are water source of some rivers. Famous River from the district is Thulo Bheri, mix of two main rivers Bheri and Jumdula. Suligad, Galligad, Rupgad, Naligad, Palgad, Kolagad, Byansgad, Karabgad, Chalgad, Chungad, Musigad, etc. are the smaller one that goes to Bheri. Most of the water sources of the rivers are Himalayas. Mount Putha, Dhaulagiri Mountain, Mukot Mountain, Kanjiroba Mountain etc are famous mountains of Dolpo. People go to Dolpo to sense the beauty of nature.

Although, people both tourists and pilgrims travel great distances to Dolpo to see many natural, cultural and religious wonders such are Shey Phoksundo National Park, Phoksundo Lake, Shey-Gumba, Bala Tripura Sundari Temple and Dho Valley, Tichorong Valley, Bheri River Valley, Jagadulla River Valley etc. Hinduism, Buddhism and Bonpo are major religions in Dolpo. Hinduism is more dominant in the southern parts of lower Dolpo. And noticeable Buddhism and Bon are in the North.

Northern border and upper Dolpo

Mostly, the people of Dolpo use two border points Kyato and Marimla to connect to Tibet. Oral memory suggests that until 2001, there was only one border point in Yari of Humla, and a custom office's was there but with limited or almost zero presence of any administration. However in practice there are five border points, three in Dolpo and two in Humla from where, traders travel to Kahasa of Tibet, especially for collecting rice and salt. There are four border pillars installed by Nepal in the border area with China. But it is argued that these pillars were erected without the mutual consent between the two countries. Hence, once the barter system that existed between the people of Nepal and China is now substituted by the monetary exchanges. Mainly, folks from Phoksundo, Bhijer, Saldang, Likhu, Pahara, Kaigun even from Jumla travel to Kyato *chhoura*

and folks from Dho, Mukot, Kakot, Tsarka, Sahartara, Lawan cross over to the Marim La border to *Lhamae chhoura*.

There are two types of border engagements that are visible, but limited only to trading. After traders in Nepal bid the tender for Nepal Food Corporation (NFC) to purchase rice, these traders go to the places like Kyato and Marimla of Tibet to bring rice. For the traders only, once Chinese security allows the border to open for 10-15 days so that rice and salt is transported to the Dolpo. Similarly once in a year the border is opened by China for the Nepalese traders and locals to collect food materials and other essential items for their daily use. This is the time when yarchagumba trading takes place on these borders. However the cross border cultural engagements are remain restricted. In the past, there was trend of marriage between the people of Nepal and Tibet. But at present, this trend has almost come to an end because of the strict monitoring and restriction on the Chinese borderland.

People recall, it was much easier when they were allowed to cross the border. There was work for them in the winter and they could buy anything whenever they wanted. After the border restrictions, now people have to buy things for a year and it is not possible to survive for an entire year on what they buy during the 10 days of border opening. There are difficulties in terms of finances and at times families face helplessness due to the lack of money or not having enough money to spend it all at once. Further Kyato bazaar is the border area. The settlement is further away, at least a day's walk or so from the border area. Until 1999 it was still easier for the people of Dolpo to travel to Humla through Kyato. But during the Maoists time it became strict and further strengthened from 2008 and now people's movement is limited to Kyato. Earlier Kyato bazaar use to run for 2 months but gradually they shortened it to 15 days only.

Previously it was food items that were transported from the Nepali side. Especially potato and "uha" used to be transported and in return they would get salt and wool. Hence people of Nepali side had an advantage over the trade relations and they could lay out the rules for the trading which is now changed substantially. Now it is the people of the other side of the border who set the rules and game plan for the trading. At this time people were allowed to take their cattle to Tibetan side for grazing but now Nepalis are taxed for their animal as well which goes 1000 rupees for animal if they take it even only during market period. Further, now the trading is mostly done of yarchagumba and other illegal items ,even the price of yarcha is fixed by the Chinese. Moreover, people of Nepali side seem much more dependent on the market opening which allows them to get money out of yarcha trading locally and buy food stuff in return. It is argued locally that business with China must be strengthened as this is the main income source for the people on the other side of the border in Nepal. And any disturbance in border trading would further adversely affect the livelihoods issues of the people.

8.1 Northern border of upper Dolpo and Dunai administration

The way in which Northern border of Dolpo functions and the trade practices exist raises certain questions in terms of the presence of Nepali state. From the field it appears that Dunai's administration has limited responsibility in terms of Nepal-China border relations in Dolpo. This is also due to the fact that people

from Upper Dolpo have little presence in Dolpo's overall administrative functioning. This is in contrast to the other Northern borders. For instance, in Humla or Rasuwa where both sides of government decide on various terms and conditions for border engagement, in Dolpo it is the locals from the Nepali side who are involved in this process.

There are various reasons that people talk about when it comes to acquiring support from the Nepali state. This is also due the fact that in upper Dolpo the presence of the state security apparatus is seen almost nil. In addition, at times staffs present in Dunai have little interest in dealing with these complicated bilateral issues. Pema Tsering, of Nisal, Saldang narrated the story and difficulties that they face due to the indifference of the Nepali state. Pema Tsering also showed sample of a letter sent from the Chinese government to the Thalus of upper Dolpo regarding dates of border opening and closing in 2015.

Due to yarcha, the life of the people in this place has transformed to a greater extent. Now people are not dependent on agriculture only. In fact they have stopped doing agriculture rigorously. Now they rely on yarcha collection and its trade. It is very difficult for us to conclude shopping goods in 10 days. Even if our yaks and horses go a bit further in the grass land for grazing we aren't allowed to go out looking for them after 10 days. We have to leave it there only. This is a loss for us. A meeting was held between the rep of China (Shigatse Prefecture) and rep of Dolpa. We made three requests to the Chinese government. We asked for the border restriction to be lifted off; to allow us to travel across the border anytime of the year for trade and other purposes. We requested them to lift off the bars around their pasture land because even the 10 days we spend there during border opening, our yaks have to go hungry. We asked them to allow any member of the family to go to China with one pass. Now we have to pay royalty for every member of the family to go to China. We also requested the Chinese government to construct a road across the Khum Khola lek. They said they will. Eevn Tashi, Urgen local chief of the place and Dhanu Budha MP was present in this meeting, but it did not fetch any result. A road is under construction from Chinese border to Tinje. The budget is already released by the Nepal government but it is not progressing well.²²

Similar concerns were raised by other people in this area. Another informant in Dho Tarap explained about the ways in which rules are set for the border business.

Beforehand Khampas (tibetens) set their limit for trade. If they say there has to be trade of 90 lakhs in a particular year, we will have to give them business of 90 lakhs. It is somewhat similar to salt trade. The Khampas sneak in to our side and meet with us and fix these rules while having survey of the area. Even our people will support them to finalise these deals. There is no security at the Nepali side of the border so they are free to come but at the Tibet (China) side, they have CCTVs and security police patrolling the border.²³

Moreover local of upper Dolpo see it as a weakness on the part of the state to let people of upper Dolpo realize that they too are the citizens of this country called Nepal. Further this border is seen as benefiting only the people those who do trading from this pass once in a year. It is assumed that 15 days of cross-

²² Interview conducted on December 2, 2016.

²³ Jhampa Lama, a resident of Dho Tarap shared about internal dynamics of border security with China. An interview with Jhampa was conducted at his residence in Dho on October 7, 2017.

border trade is only for the benefits of those involved basically Bhotias (Dolpo) and Khampas (Tibet). The difficult geographical location has made it a further isolated space in the Himalayas.

In absence of having authentic information on the people, negotiations and the hardships involved to get there physically make it difficult for the actors from administration to take any interest on the issues that is faced by the people of upper Dolpo. The source of information for the administration in Dunai is therefore limited to the stories shared by the big traders who could hire helicopter to go to China for trading and the people who would come down to Dunai during summer season.

Mainly there are two groups of security men who would be employed in the area, one in Dho and another in Takshi during yarchagumba season. But their movement too is restricted to giving security to the big traders. Lokendra Bohara, Police Hawaldar deputed in Takshi shared:

There are two police cell deputed in upper Dolpo, one in Dho Tarap and another in Takshi. At Dho station 6 police men are posted while at Takshi there are 4 police men. The main responsibility of the policemen out here is to give security to yarcha businessman and traders. They are also responsible for taking record of how much yarcha is exported by how many traders and whether they had legal permit paper for it or not. But it is difficult to carry out this job. Yarcha collection permit is provided by two different offices. People of 14 VDCs (now wards) are given permit to collect yarcha by DFO, the remaining 9 VDCs are under the jurisdiction of the National Park. We don't know how they have managed villages under them. Locals from Tinje, Bhijer, Mukot, etc won't come down all the way to Dunai to receive leave permit. They have their traditional market. That is a leakage in tax collection because we don't know how much they are selling. There is no data. We have security mobilized at places in the lek. The National Park will take care of forests of their side. We only know how to deal with ours. At this time we are stationed at the old house of the ward chairman. He is the one who had provided us with blankets and extra food material. Without his support we would not survive here. Last year (2017) two police men died while crossing Saldang due to climate sickness. It is difficult to work here and even to provide security to the people is a distant reality. We carried ration with us but it ran out quickly and now we are dependent on ward chairmen. We will stay here for another two weeks until border trading closes.²⁴

This points to how peripheral boundaries are created within a periphery. In such a context an already contested border becomes a space for negotiation for the people while to manage their daily livelihood. An indifferent centre therefore only contributes to the conditions that would appear absurd for trading. This is what the picture painted by the residents when talked about the Northern borders of Dolpo. This is a case in assimilation of peripheries within the periphery.

²⁴ Interview conducted with Lokendra Bohara in Takshi on August 7, 2017.

9. Yarcha collection and its trade: a major source of income

At the beginning of the year 2000, as a result of boom in China for Yarchagumba (*Cordyceps Sinensis*) – a medicinal caterpillar fungus prevalent in the Tibetan Plateau – a new economical forte has come forward. Auspiciously, about 31.48% area of Dolpo is covered by grassland which makes it a suitable habitat for Yarsagunbu (Shrestha et al., 2014). During harvesting time an estimated 50-60 thousand people usually concentrate to yarcha collection specifically in Dolpo. These harvesters come exclusively from Dolpo, the neighboring districts and a few from Tibet. 90 percent of the collected yarcha is being traded from Northern border at Tibet (Chalaune and Raj 2017). The border is opened for few days with bilateral communication between locals of upper Dolpo and Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) neighbor to North Dolpo.

9.1 Yarchagumba season

Yarcha collection and trading season starts from Asar (June-July) – and last until Kartik (November). The District Forest Sector Coordination Committee (DFSCC) usually coordinates for finalizing dates for yarcha collection. This committee comprises of VDC chair person, federal development officer in the district (sthaniya bikas adhikari), District forest officer (Jilla ban adhikarti). This person is also member secretary of the committee. A member of the committee shared:

If needed, we would do such a meeting but only for Yarchagumba season. A meeting is required because we have to mobilize the military and the police for security reasons. Also, because yarcha is found largely within and around National Park area, this work area is under the National Park and it gets operated according to their policy, it can be collected for only a month. It usually starts from the first week of Jestha to the last week of the same month. In the committee, there are also representatives of Community Forest office where it is mostly locals who are mobilized for spreading the word on date for yarcha collection. The news travels through them. We also announce the news through the local radio..²⁵

Also district representatives of various offices along with the CDO, district leaders of every political parties form the committee. Organizations working in the area of environment and forest represents as a member of the committee. Other offices under the Ministry of Forest are also members of the committee (such as Bhu samrachhan, Nikunj, Suraksha Nikaya ka pramukh pratinidhi, Udhog banijya sangh ko pratinidhi and sthaniya). This committee formulates policy regarding yarcha trade and collection in the district. The decision made by the committee is seen as the rule for yarcha collection which then gets regulated by the concerned authorities in the district. This committee decides the date of opening and closing the Yarchagumba season. For collection of other herbs, it is more systematized and rules are already set.

²⁵ Interview conducted with Bhakta Bahadur Thapa a member of the Yarcha Collection Committee during September/October 2016 in Dunai.

9.2 Issuing permits and collection of royalty

The process of issuing permits to the collectors/harvesters contradicts the law/policy. The law states that a collector enter the forest or the *lek* only after receiving the Collection Permit however this rule does not appear being followed by the residents. During the period of yarcha collection hundreds and thousands of people come together to collect yarcha with multiple members from same family. Hence it was suggested that it is difficult to issue the permit to everybody.

Yarchagumba trade was officially legalized in 2001/02 (2058 BS) during premier Deuba's tenure. Initially a tax of Rs. 20,000/kg was imposed. It was later brought down to Rs. 10,000/kg. However earlier to this the Maoists charged royalty from collectors. In the past, facts have emerged on how the Maoists financed their war expenses by selling herbs from Karnali that contributed to 75% of their expenses at least.²⁶ And it was obvious that yarcha and other illegal herbs were exported under Maoists cover.

For instance Ang Bahadur Lama of Phoksundo recalled:

In 2059 (2002/2003), the Maoists robbed about 700 kg of Yarchagumba being carried on 18 mules. It belonged to Dhan Bahadur Budha. The Maoists sold it in China themselves and brought money packed in bags on 18 mules. Kshitiz and Ram Lal BK (CPN-Maoists sabhasad). Bishnu Lal Buda and I were taking a trip on behalf of that Plan. They forced us to sit down and did a press meet then and there where they told us how they robbed Dhan Bahadur Buda's Yarchagumba and sold it and made money for themselves.²⁷

It further gets continuity when it comes to tax collection from yarcha collector but in a different form than what Maoists resorted to in the past. There are two types of royalty collection - formal and informal. The royalty collected by the Forest Office is formal but at the '*leks*' the community forest users group, consumers committee- mainly locals - collect additional fee from non-native collectors. They extract fees from outsiders while arguing that they would invest money collected towards conservation of the forest and land after yarcha collection. This practice is going on informally from the beginning.

An officer at forest office in Dunai shared:

They (forest user groups) issue permits to outsiders. We've said them time and again that it is illegal but they won't stop. We've announced it on the radio as well that they can't do so. But we haven't been able to control it. The locals say that collectors consume timber, water from their village and they need compensation for that. Our forces aren't strong enough to regulate all that's happening in Upper Dolpo. Besides the issuing of permit and collection of taxes, everything else is informal - the demand, supply, risks.²⁸

²⁶ See article by Narayan Wagle in *Kantipur*, published in 2059 BS.

²⁷ Ang Bahadur Lama recollected stories of Maoists days in Dolpo at length. He talked about importance of Yarchagumba trade during Maoists conflict in Dolpo. He was interviewed during September/October 2016 in Dunai.

²⁸ Interview conducted with this official during September/October 2016 in Dunai.

However in contrary, locals argue that popular and expensive herb Yarchagumba can be found at the altitude of about 5000m. Dolpa's Yarsa is termed to be of the best quality compared to other places. Armed police force is sent to the places of collection to ensure security for yarcha collectors. Armies get deputed especially in the conservation area (National Park) and the buffer zones. The people going to collect Yarsa in the Conservation area are permitted to enter only after the payment of entry fee in the Conservation office. The entry fees rate differ. People from the core area are charged Rs.500 per person, people of Dolpo (other than of core area) are charged Rs.2000 per person and people coming from other districts are charged Rs.3000 per person. From the field data it appears that until 2015, District Forest Office (DFO) charged revenue of Rs.10, 000 for a kg of Yarchagumba while this year (2017), the revenue has mounted to Rs.25, 000 per kg. Yarchagumba trade was banned during the year 2064/65 B.S. (2008/2009). In the year 2015, 52, 300 (data as recorded by Nepal Police) entries were seen for the collection of Yarcha. And the price of Yarchagumba last year (2015/2016) was Rs.500 for the small pieces each and Rs. 12, 00-15, 00 for the bigger ones. During 2015/2016, the downfall in the price of Yarcha had mostly affected the middle men compared to the collectors. A kg of Yarchagumba weighs around 2, 000 - 2,200 pieces (if big) and 4, 000 - 4, 200 pieces (if small). Thus there exists a tension at the ground where yarcha is produced. This varies from protecting one's native land to its conservation to tax collection.

9.3 Monopoly of the contractors

On the ground, practice for getting permit differs compared to the policies framed. The policy mentions that one will have to come to the forest office and receive the permit before going to the forest. However, there are businessmen who trade in Yarchagumba and the contractors who basically receive the Collection Permit on behalf of all the collectors. The contractors then go up to the forests with money (and the permit as well) and buy yarchagumbas from the collectors. This is when they require security. It is up to the contractor and the collector to negotiate the price of the herb. They bargain, they haggle and get their job done. There are multiple ways in which Yarchagumba collection is carried out. Sometimes the contractor will pay the collector beforehand in cash or goods (rice). They will deduct or add as per their previous deal with the collector and pay them accordingly. Sometimes it is the collectors who will bargain with the contractors for the price. These points to the existing monopoly exist even in yarcha collection as well as pricing it for sale.

Such helplessness was obvious while exploring in the field about yarcha trade. Mostly, a large chunk of Yarchagumba is exported to China, Bangkok and Singapore in comparison to the European countries and of which almost around 85 to 90% of it is traded from Northern Tibetan borders. In the year 2013 and 2014 the price of Yarchagumba went up to Rs. 27/28 lakh (2.8 million) whereas in the year 2015, 2016 and 2017, the price dropped to Rs. 11 lakh (1.1 million). It is also due to this reason that both Chinese and Nepali government play hardly any role regarding the supply and demand of the herb. It is just the businessmen and the suppliers which make it much trickier and therefore brokering is the only way to manipulate earning.

The confusion on yarcha collection and its pricing is not only limited to local people who collect it or get influenced by the big businessmen and contractors but it appears prevalent with the ones who actually regulate these trading episodes. This also points to the grievances as well as underlying conflicts that remain on the part of local yarcha collectors, contractors and regulators. It is in this context that one of the members of yarcha permit issuing committee shared:

The price is decided on the demand basis. We don't have any say in this. We are officially informed and connected until the collection of royalty. We are provided with news unofficially regarding what was the rate in the year. We issue leave permits or export permit to the contractors. So we know how much they have sold. We don't know of the locals who collect on their own and sell it to other contractors or in China themselves. They will only pay royalty to us..²⁹

After an unexpected boom in yarcha collection during the years of 2000s people report a decline in quantity of yarchagumbas. It is argued that this is also due to haphazard ways of harvesting yarcha and its collection. Ang Bahadur Lama, of Phoksundo, currently with the HIMALI project, was previously involved with KIRDARC, Winrock International & One Heart International. Lama talked in length about HIMALI project's work in the region and challenges of developmental work in Dolpo. He talked about depletion of Yarchagumba in the region and gives an example of Tibet and the way of harvesting Yarchagumbathat can be an appropriate way to retain the productivity.

He argued:

Tibet has followed this rule where they open the 'leks' for collection on a rotational basis. One year they open one patan (area) for collection and let the other restore and replenish. We are thinking but a policy has not yet formulated for that. How can we just stop all these people from entering the lek? India has banned it altogether. In China, it is much regulated. It is chaotic in Nepal.³⁰

Dolpo: during the Maoists war

The stress of the civil war was not felt much in upper Dolpo until 2000, the situation changed after the Dunai attack. Before this attack people were not interested in the everyday politics of elsewhere in Nepal. They continuously tried to differentiate themselves suggesting that culturally they were more Tibetans than Nepali and therefore they can be indifferent to the ongoing political struggle. However, by the beginning of 1996 Maoists movements had already started its outreach to the lower part of Dolpo. Although they were not in the forefront of struggle yet the undercurrents of the Maoists spread was obvious.

It was Dunai attack that situated Dolpo in a memorable space in the Maoist war. Dunai was the first district headquarter attacked by the Maoists on a midnight on a Sunday, 25 September 2000. Maoist's incursion with around 1000 guerrilla fighters suddenly put this peaceful place into a violent one in the public

²⁹ Interview conducted in Dunai during September/October 2016.

³⁰ Interview conducted with Lama in Dunai during September/October 2016.

debate. This led to freeing prisoners, looting Rs 50 million from the Nepal Bank branch and abducting 12 officials. Also 7 Maoists and 14 policemen were killed in this attack. Dolpo district was chosen because of its remoteness allowed delay in the state response, and the mountains that offered escape routes for the Maoists to their command areas back to Rukum and Jajarkot. This strike was planned and led by Barsha Man Pun, who later became Finance Minister in 2011 and his wife served as speaker of the parliament.

While gathering moral boost from Dunai attack, Maoists rapidly started spreading their reach to the far remote areas of upper Dolpo. Initially, it was cadres from the lower Dolpo who took charge of consolidating Maoists base in the district. People from the lower belt were more attracted to join the Maoists especially from Kalika, Narkhu, Sarmi, Rimi, Kaigaun and Lahan. Security forces were not strongly present in these villages. Dunai, the HQ was under tight security and people didn't get to mix with each other. However in upper Dolpo, it was different. Since they speak two languages, they communicated with the Maoists saying one thing but they expressed their fear to each other. This process had started as early as in 2054 (1998) when army shot 8 people at Kalika Ma. Vi. The locals became vengeful towards the military and joined the Maoists. There was an increase in Maoists support after this. An informant, also from upper Dolpa recalled.

The school where I taught was a government school but mostly invested by foreigners. The Maoist kept nagging me asking that the sponsors must be stopped from involving in schools as it was against what the Maoists were fighting for. Foreign intervention should be prohibited, they said. They sometimes troubled us when they would hold meetings and they would ask people from upper Dolpa to come all the way down to Lower Dolpa. They threatened that they would not hesitate to murder a few people who came in their way. Nevertheless Maoists did not harm us or our schools apart from troubling us with preparing food for them and occasionally for donation. It was more peaceful than now. Even after the Peace Process, there has been no improvement in security. There is no military presence and we only have a handful of police. Military barrack has been in the Phoksundo area.³¹

Representative from INSEC Bishnu Devkota extensively discussed about the life in Dolpo during war time. Nevertheless he argued that the war was worth it if you keep violence induced fear and trauma aside. He argued the Maoists brought awareness in Dolpalis and to some extent empowered women and gave them a chance to raise their voice. And this can be seen as one of the major achievements of the Maoists struggle. He shared his experiences as a reporter and journalist in Dolpo:

I started reporting from 2053, Asar 26 (July 10, 1996). I started with RSS. There wasn't much means of communication back then. We used Aba set for reporting. The news used to take a week to reach to Kathmandu after recording. Nepal Airlines had a flight once in a week. There weren't other private airlines. Dolpa wasn't strained before the 2057 attack on Dunai. I had rented a room right behind the District Police Station. The combatants fought from my room. I wanted to report

³¹ Interview conducted with Urgen Budha in Dunai during September/October 2016.

as soon as it happened but the Maoists said I can't leave my room until the war was over. They knew I was a journalist.

It appeared that Nepal government's security forces weren't much prepared. Before the attack, there were rumors of Maoists planning an attack on Dolpo. We heard it from friends from adjoining villages of Jajarkot, Rukum closer to Kalika, Laha VDCs of Dolpo. The dangas who are now Armed Police Force landed in Dunai around mid-afternoon that very day of Dunai attack. It wasn't clear where in Dolpo they were going to attack but it was certain Maoists guerrilla fighters were moving towards Dolpo. The news of a looming attack was reported through DAO to the Home Minister. The ministry sent 48 dangas. It was the 9th of September 2000. The dangas put up tents on the playground across Bheri and created a makeshift mess at Saraswati High School. They carried out their routine trainings as well. Locals became sure something was going to happen. With the arrival of dangas people became more confident of their safety. At 11:00 in the night on 25th September 2000 night, the Maoists attacked Dunai headquarter.

A week before the attack, the Maoists had transported kerosene on mules to store nearby DPS. On the day of attack, they took away all the kerosene with which they set fire to the prison. They divided themselves into two groups. A bigger group was on the market side. The smaller group went to the other side and set alight the prison. Before they fought the police, they let the prisoners escape. They used pseudo names to address each other. I heard them talk from their walky-talky in my room. They addressed each other as Bheri, Karnali. They took over the Malpot Karyalaya and Agriculture Development Bank where they treated their wounded fighters. They had a medical team with them. They destroyed the prison and the DPS. The fight between security forces and Maoists stopped around 7:30/8:00 am next morning. The CDO had reported about the incident to the Home Ministry half an hour after the fight broke.

I also took a chance and reported the incident to Govinda Raj Joshi. He had said that he would send night vision helicopters but they never came. The Nepalese Army was rendered helpless as the Maoists had cut down their twin. Altogether 16 people died - 14 police officers, two other residents. Dead bodies of seven Maoists were also found next day. They carried their wounded with themselves and buried bodies of some along the bank of Tipla. Next day when Govinda Raj Joshi was above Dunai trying to land, the Maoists were still walking in the forest with the huge white boxes they had stolen from the bank. The police had become hopeless. They had lost 14 of their soldiers and were out of bullets. Kailash Nath Kharel was the CDO then. His family had arrived the day before. Together, they hid in the septic tank. Their guard was shot dead by the Maoists when they went looking for the CDO. Baburam Bhattarai had come to Dunai 3 months ahead of the attack and had devised the final plan. The Maoists disclosed this after they declared victory in programs in lower belt of Dolpo.

There wasn't much response from the center after the attack. Govinda Raj Joshi assured all that is destroyed will be rebuilt. But his tenure finished and nothing got reconstructed. If the government was keen on addressing the war in Dunai, they could've easily sent more soldiers or night vision

helicopters. The Maoists, however, did not harm the locals. The Maoists who attacked had come from Rolpa, Rukum, Jajarkot. There weren't any locals involved in the war. This was all pre-planned and they started district attacks from Dolpo itself. Then they attacked Holleri in Rolpa, and a police station in Jajarkot. But it took our government to feel the pressure only after the Maoists robbed the barrack in Dang. They mobilized the military after the incident in Dang.

In 2058 Magh 8, the Maoists attacked me in my home in Tripurakot. A village named Galli in Tripurakot, they had set up a camp from where they constantly threatened the armies at Suligaad. They had organized a program at Tripura Ma. Vi. Nepalese armies raided the program and the Maoists were caught off guard. They fled the venue and two Maoists (women) died while escaping. Others fled across the lek and rested in Jumla. I went to the village on the very day and took information of the incident in Radio Nepal's Ghatana ra Bichar. The news played at 9:00 pm. The bite ended with my name. Immediately, they kicked my door. 35 of them in group called for me. I went outside. They said we need to talk to you. I said about what? They replied our commander wants to talk to you. I questioned who commander? They replied Prachanda and further said No, a different commander. I asked where he was and they replied he's downstairs. I insisted on not leaving the premises of my house. They threatened me if I didn't walk, they will kill me. I stayed and after that they caught me by the back of my neck and took me to the horse stable. They called me 'purano satta ko pujari' and said they were there to get rid of me. Comander ordered his toli and I was struck by a handle of a gun. All 35 of them kicked me. I said outright what I did was my duty. I verified what had happened and wrote with truth. It's true you ran away. They were furious after what I reported. They stayed from 9:15-11:00 while I lay unconscious. They gashed my hand. The wound is healed now. They didn't kill me but gave me painkillers before they left. The Maoists sent a message to the NA of the assault on me. They abused my 89 year old father as well. At 12:00, NA reached my house, helped me on a horse and brought me to Suligaad barrack. Next day from Dunai they sent me to Kathmandu for treatment on a Fishtail helicopter.

I stayed in Kathmandu and started reporting for Ghatana ra Bichar, left RSS and was appointed by Gorkhapatra. In 2063, I got transferred to Nepalgunj as Gorkhapatra's regional coordinator. At Jajarkot's Junga Thapa chour, the Maoists were holding a huge program where Baburam Bhattarai and Prachanda were coming out. Netra KC who was with BBC insisted I attend the program. I hesitated because I was with the government media but Netra persisted. Along with Bhola Man from Insec, Netra KC, Rameshwor Bohara and few others headed towards Dailekh. NA found out about our travel and they sent helicopters. Paths were too narrow for anybody to run and the NA started shooting from their helicopter. Maoists were ready for our protection on the way to the school where the program was going to be held. A woman guarding Netra KC was shot dead then and there. She was defending Netra KC. We got fearful but kept moving. The program was planned for the day but the helicopter flying in the sky created disturbance and it was held at night. 96 bhaisas and 36 houses had been destroyed by the bombs they threw. At 1:00, Baburam addressed us along Krishna Mahara and with other people. Prachanda was not there. 2 hours after the program, Netra KC asked about why they had sent people to attack me. Baburam denied it saying it could've been someone from my own village. He said I wasn't their target. Next morning,

we traveled to Nepalgunj together hiding the documents we had. Radio Nepal reported that a group of human rights workers and journalists have been manhandled by the Maoists. Baburam Bhattarai smirked at the news. Have we even touched you? You see how they lie? He asked us. We breathed a sigh of relief once we reached Kohalpur. We decided we will report on the same day from our media houses. There wasn't much the military could do to all of us at once to block the news. We reported 3 days after we reached Nepalgunj. Rukmangad Katwal was the jarsinghab in Madhya paschim prant. He approached us and said we should have a sumadhur sambandha. Every day he invited us to lunch at 5:00 where we provided updates of the whole day. The military vehicle picked us up. They said we don't have to write for them but also don't write for the Maoists. By then, our interest had shifted to knowing more about the Maoists as Baburam had just come out. We tried to find ways of bringing out their news to the public. I was the first journalist attacked during the conflict period. Second was a reporter from Kalikot who was murdered by the Maoists. They started from Karnali. IPI made public bulletin at a press conference at Yak & Yeti Hotel where they wrote about the attacks on media persons. I have been awarded the Bhusan Patrakarita Purashkar along with 2 other wards.³²

Devkota's experience with the Maoists and the war presents a clear narrative in which locals as well as media people operated during the war period. It is also evident how torture and threat to life during those days appeared obvious in the hinterland. It was similar to both people who did not have any support or those who had appropriate support mechanism on the ground. Similar narratives were presented by other locals when they reflected on Maoists days in the district.

Dolpo after the Maoist war and socio-political dynamics

Since the beginning of the peace process, there has been substantive change in Dolpo at various fronts including changes in modern housing facilities especially in the market areas, its economy and religious and socio-cultural practices. But these changes are taking place slowly but inexorable which appears blurred while maintaining boundaries. Individual agency appears much stronger compared to old existed cultural boundaries. People argue that it is a change that has occurred only after Maoists movement. In some sense, at least in lower part of Dolpo, the formation of political beings has increased with diverse political ideology. At this front, society seems much more divided and there remains an undercurrent of tensions. There is a shift in 'transition circuits' as Fisher (2017) points out where transition still exist but not of consumable food items but of yarsagumba, carpet and thanaka paintings as well as illegal herbs. Thus in Dolpo once trading limited to barter system is now seem transformed to a major economic frontier that has contributed to the livelihoods of the people. Similarly there is no more passive absorbing of ideas or policies that used to be the case in the hinterland. Instead, at the local level people are reactive, at times innovative and there is a concentrated attempt to create and recreate differentiated cultural space

³² Devkota also worked as a journalist in Dunai during war – time and worked for INSEC. This interview was conducted on December 5, 2016. For further reference see, Adhikari (2015: 206). In footnote 70 of his book, Adhikari mentions regarding Dunai attack and his interview with the commander Barsa Man Pun.

while carefully negotiating transformation of traditions. An approach to connect to the modernity while protecting native originality, spirituality and culture is at play.

These dichotomies are also the byproduct of increasing improvement in the facilities and reach of the younger generation to education in Dolpo altogether. After the introduction of village councils through gaunpalika mechanism (rural municipalities) residents seem hopeful of handling their own issues through these local level mechanisms. For instance, an informant in upper Dolpo shared that the problems of government teachers not showing up in the schools has always been an issue. Previously people were not able to raise their voices so easily because they had to rub shoulders with them after all when they had to go Dunai for any official work. This informant suggested that now these issues will be resolved within Village Council by elected new representatives. Officials and elected members will be held accountable for their work which is until now handled from Dunai itself which is at least 5 days walk from Saldang or Tinje or Bhijer. He continued on possible change:

Situation hasn't changed from the time of the war. Local level elections would probably change a few things. The VDC secretaries come up to the village once or twice a year. They come to distribute the Samajik Suraksha Bhatta (social security benefits) and sometimes for anugaman (monitoring). The process is difficult for locals to follow and sometimes when people travel all the way down to Dunai, there could be something missing and they have to return empty handed. If there were village councils, all this hassle will be reduced..³³

In the case of upper Dolpo, adoption of the Nepali language by people is seen as useful and it has contributed in increasing people's skills in negotiate their space within the Nepali state which was only possible after the Maoist movement in the area. Back then it was necessary to learn a few words of Nepali to negotiate with Maoist cadres. Simultaneously young kids started studying Nepali language in schools which increased their proficiency. Further, mobility of people from lower part of Dolpo has intensified mostly due to Yarchagumba. This too has contributed in regular transaction between people from upper Dolpo and other part of Dolpo as well as Nepal.

Urgen Dorje Budha of Saldang recalled:

When I was a student, we didn't mix well with people from lower Dolpo. Bhotias didn't come down during the summer thinking they would get 'lu' – hot waves. But my father insisted I should go to a school and so I attended Likhu School (one of the famous and old school from where first generation Dolpali got basic education). My further's education was in Pokhara. I ran to Pokhara to my father as he didn't have more money to educate me outside. There is a transaction that takes place between people of upper Dolpo and other part of Dolpo due to herbs and slowly picking up of tourism especially in the national park areas. The herb was always there in Dolpo but people didn't know the value of it. However, massive encroachment while picking up the yarcha has negative impact on environment. Nevertheless it has opened doors for opportunities and social

³³ An interview conducted with Paljhang Lama in Takshi village on 7 August 2017.

crimes at the same time. We were peaceful Buddhist communities pretty much hard workers but people have started to rely on Yarchagumba for their everyday expenses. So much so, that they loan money in advance hoping that they would pay back after they sell Yarchagumba in the season. And if one does not get enough value for it, what will they eat? We have stopped tilling our fields and not willing to do any kind of labor work. Our traditional lifestyle of moving down to villages and taking up shelter in the villages has changed. Our Buddhist values have been washed away. Although at present schooling in upper Dolpo appear much better due to foreign sponsorships. But Lower Dolpalis still think we are backward. They still think they can walk all over us and think of us as uncivilized barbaric.³⁴

This is also evident from the way in which people of upper Dolpo are symbolized as Bhotas. This was also reflected during finalization of village councils in upper Dolpo. After several rounds of conflicting debates and resource mapping it was agreed that there would be 2 village councils in upper Dolpo. People from lower belt argued intensely on having only 2 VCs in upper Dolpo. And hence there is a feeling that people of upper Dolpo have always been pushed aside by the people from Lower Dolpo and those who are at the decision making loop. Finally Saldang, Shey and Bhijer are combined to form one council. But there remains conflict in finalizing main village council office. Nevertheless people are hopeful that development will be carried out in faster pace after these changes. There is a hope in the ground that some support from the Chinese government in terms of infrastructure development would come and perhaps, they will build a road for the people of upper Dolpo. They see Tinje border road construction as a posture in this direction.

Conclusion

Thus in conclusion, there remains an uncertainty when it comes to development of Dolpo and therefore fear continues. Previously it was about being isolated in the valleys, in the glaciers without any security including of food. But now there is a fear of losing one's own authenticity, environment and spiritual culture. There is a fear that if prices of yarcha drop down, what next. The conflict remains between people of upper Dolpa and others outsiders with whom they interact. The sense prevails that living in the upper part of Dolpo is a disadvantage and it continues. It is this reason that a sense of mistrust between 'they' (people of lower Dolpo) and 'us' (people of upper Dolpo) prevails. This is coming from the experiences following from the generations where people from the other part of Dolpo looked down upon the people of upper part. There is a sense that this still exist.

For decades Dolpa's overall development had been obstructed due to road connectivity. Reports and discussions on Dolpo were limited to and overshadowed by the issues pertaining to food

³⁴ Interview was conducted with Urgen Dorjee Budha, teacher of Saldang on November 26, 2016. Urgen is considered a leader of Upper Dolpa. He started teaching at Tinje School from 2057 BS. The struggles he went through to acquire good education pushed him to pursue education professionally. Now he feels that he did the right thing by not pursuing other profession. Youngsters from his community needed someone to whom they could look up to. And now he is a role model in the village also he is the only government teacher native of Upper Dolpo. His father was elected VDC President twice during the Panchayat Regime.

insecurity. Further from the discussion³⁵ it appeared that during the conflict, budgets were misdirected by the Maoists. The little that was sent to the VDCs, were seized by the Maoists. Everything that came to Dunai, VDC secretaries took control of it. Planning and projects were limited to Dunai and continued only in papers. After the war ended, in the Maoists' word – '*purna dhwansa bata punanirman suru bhayeko chai rahyo*' from total destruction to reconstruction started. But that too remained overshadowed due to the lack of a leader who could take it forward. Nevertheless what people of Dolpo can accomplish is beyond prediction. The accounts of people presented above therefore gives a sense in which one may be able to understand the people of Dolpo and their habitation, the transformations and continuity in a obviously conflicting paradigms.

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³⁵ On December 2, 2016 an FGD was conducted with seven people from Bhot at a hotel in Dunai. The discussion was centered on their struggle and the changes they have witnessed in their villages. Sonam Tenzin Gurung from Takshi and Chhime Kyapto participated actively in the discussion. They had come down from their villages to travel to Nepalgunj/Kathmandu and had errands to run..

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DISTRICT PROFILE OF HUMLA

Chapter 3

Humla: A Strategic Northern Border Frontier

Bhawana Olee

Geographic Information

East: Mugu

North: China

Latitude: 29°.35'-30°.57' North

Height: 1524m-7337m from the sea level

West: China

South: Bajhang, Bajura and Mugu districts

Longitude: 81°.18'-82°.7' East

Political and Administrative Division

Development Region: Mid western

Zone: Karnali

Electoral Constituency Region: 1

Total Village Development Committees (VDC): 27

Municipality: 0

Total Area: 5655 Sq.km

District: Humla

Total Area (Ilaka) Region: 9

Total Area: 5655 Sq.km

Demographic Information

Total Population: 50,858

- Male Population: 25,833

- Female Population: 25,025

-Gender Ratio: 103.23

Total Household number: 9479

Average Household size: 5.37

Literacy rate above 5 years: 47.8%

Male Literacy: 62%

Population density per km: 8.99

Female Literacy: 33%

Human Development Index: 0.432¹

¹ Above mentioned Geographic, Demographic and Administrative information is extracted from the District Profile-2072 published by District Development Committee of Humla on shrawan and the data in the profile is based on the census 2011.

Table 1: Human Development Indices of Humla

Life expectancy at birth	Adult Literacy	Mean years of schooling	GDP Per Capita (PPP US\$)	Percentage of people not expected to survive to age 40	Percentage of children under age of five who are malnourished	HDI Rank
64.15	37.22	2.22	794	11.60	65.7	68

Brief Introduction of Humla

In the present federal structure, Humla district falls under province number six. It is located in the North-west of Karnali zone of the Mid-western region. It is the second largest district with the second lowest population density in the country. It has an area of 5,655 square kilometer and Simikot is the district headquarter. The HDI (Human Development Index) value of the district is 0.432 positioning it the 74th out of 75 districts of the country.

Humla still lacks the access to roads making it one of the most underdeveloped districts of the country. The district is considered one of the most remote and isolated regions in Nepal, reachable only by foot or small aircrafts which irregularly fly to Simikot. It is connected with Surkhet, Nepalgunj and Kathmandu by air. The airport can give services to small aircrafts such as twin otter and helicopter due to its short runway. Air services depend on weather of Simikot and Nepalgunj.

Humla has population of about 51,000 (CBS 2012). There is only one hospital and a campus along with a few higher secondary schools in Simikot serving the whole district. Most of the villages in Humla do not have access to electricity, communication, clean drinking water, qualified teachers and good education, and health facilities etc.

The average altitude is 3,000 m above sea level. The climate is harsh, with snow of up to four months of the year. Only 1% of the land is arable due to the rocky terrain. Its isolation has pushed Humla far behind compared to other districts of Nepal.

The ethnic composition of Humla is similar to the most of the Higher Himalayan districts. The majority of villages are populated by Chettris, Brahmins, Thakuris and Dalits. However, the northern part of the district is populated by Tibetan ethnic groups.

Strategic Importance of Border in Relation to Humla

Humla is the only district in the region that is connected to both China and India. Hilsa, the border point, in the district is the highest point in the Karnali zone. Due to its scale and geopolitical location, its significance in the northwest region of Nepal is very high. As Nepal's relationship with India at times is

under tension and turmoil (for example the 2015 Indian blockade), the importance of Hilsa is growing along with two other border points in the north, Korala in west Nepal and Tatopani in central Nepal.

Unlike other borderlands, Humla is crucial for its affinity with both India and China. The Hilsa border is the nearest connecting point to Lake Manasarovar which is close to Mount Kailash in Tibet. As this is a sacred religious part of ancient religions therefore it holds a lot of historical and cultural value. The district also has several small villages of Tibetan origin, making it one of the unique religious and historical regions in the borderlands.

Due to its rich religious traditions and direct connectivity with India and China, the brokers operate in Humla in a very different manner. Chakka Bahadur Lama² is an example; he is an influential person with links to local, national, and international power networks due to his political loyalty, trade reach, and religious connections with India and China. He is affiliated with the Nepal Communist Party (Janamorcha) which advocated well-coordinated decentralization as opposed to federalism (during the new constitution writing process) as well as a very traditional brand of nationalism. In 2005, he was nominated into then King Gyanendra's cabinet. As a businessman he is one of the most influential people in the *jadibuti* (medicinal herbs) trade through the Tibet and India borders. He also has very organized and systematic networks among Buddhist monks and Hindu priests in Tibet and India. People with such character play a role in negotiating in between the centre and the periphery.

Local understanding of Humla, the problems and its development

The local people of Humla assert the absence of road infrastructure as the major hurdle for the development of the district. 14 VDCs out of 27 are of 8-10 days walk from the headquarters. Since there are no roads and transportation facilities, people are compelled to walk to reach Simikot for 8-10 days to collect the rice provided by the district Food Authority, for health-check ups, administrative tasks like getting citizenship certificates and even purchasing basic things necessary in the day to day life. Though the people of the VDCs of upper Humla like Limi, and Thehe find it easier to cross the border and go to Taklakot and buy things like salt, oil, edibles, shoes etc. The life of people of all the VDCs are seriously difficult. The impact of the absence of transportation has made the market prices in Humla expensive. Since everything needs to be either transported through air which costs 100 rupees per kg, or carried by mules, the price of everything is high compared to other districts. Additionally, the geography to reach the far away villages from the district headquarters has been adding much difficulties in the lives of the local people with no proper drinking water facility, health facility, toilets, further leading to other sanitation hazards. Hence road construction inside Humla and the main roads connecting Hilsa and other districts has been looked upon as the only remedy to solve the problems that Humlis are compelled to face in their everyday life.

² Chaka Bahadur Lama is consented to contribute in life history study. This case will be a good case-study to examine how brokers are entangled in political, economic, and religious power. On the other hand, the case-study of Mangal Bahadur Lama, a road contractor and businessman by profession would be helpful for us to trace the intermediary role that a common man plays in the negotiation between the centre and periphery, for this, Kathmandu and Humla and even the cross border authority i.e. the Tibetan authority of China.

Hunger is a fact of daily life in Karnali, with devastating effects on the health, wellbeing, and hope of communities who live there. Since only one percent of the total land in the district is arable, food crisis is the other major problem. Humla is regarded as one of the most food insecure districts of Nepal, and subsidized rice is distributed to the families by the government of Nepal every year. Despite decades of food assistance from the government and aid agencies, little seems to have changed in Humla. It is said that before the emergence of 'chartered rice' in the mid-1970s, famine was not a prominent feature of Humla. The deliveries of rice for Humlis created a 'recipient mentality' and further promoted a rice-based diet or '*Bhaate-culture*' among all social groups in Humla. There are claims that dependency on subsidized rice has ruined traditional cultivation of staple food in Humla. The crops produced in Humla are maize, millet, barley, potato and beans. Rice cultivation is an exception. In Humla, to enhance the local products like apple, rugs made from sheep wool, beans, potatoes, marfa etc., concept of 'koshelighar' has been operated. Though cow rearing was started in Humla but it was not successful. The herbs that are brought from Karnali are- Khutki, Jatamashi, Chiraito, Bikh, Chyau, Uttis, Padamchal whose major market is India.

The People of Humla have in the past supplemented their livelihoods by engaging in trade between Tibet and regions to the South of Humla. Humlis used to deal directly with Tibetans, and trade was very lucrative. This helped maintain a high standard of living for many. Traditionally only salt and rice were traded; at present, these staples are supplemented with other consumer goods. Trade, however, has declined not only on account of border movement restrictions, but also because of economic development and the emergence of a cash economy that reduces the need for trade goods, especially on the Tibetan side.

The major source of income of most of the Humlis is running business or labor work in Taklakot, Tibet for which they are granted special pass by the District Administration Office (DAO) and the authority of Tibet. The business of herbs like Jatamashi, Kutki, Chiraito etc which has been assisting the lives of the Humlis can also be promoted as a better option for earning livelihood if proper resources are provided and infrastructure is constructed to refine and sell things in larger markets.

Humla, 'the periphery of periphery,' no doubt needs a better framework of development and concern from the local and the center level policy makers, actors and intermediaries in order to improve the quality of life of people who reside in the district.

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Rajbiraj (Saptari): A Preliminary Exploration of a Journey into Marginalization

Kalpana Jha

Introduction

Saptari is one of the Tarai districts located in Province number 2 of the newly federalised Nepal. Geographically, it can be divided into three units: Chure range in the north, Tarai in the south and Bhawar Pradesh in the middle. The district is bounded by Udayapur district in the north, Siraha district in the west, Sunsari in the east and Supaul district of Bihar in the south. Saptari is also known as the part of greater mithilanchaal region, and the major language spoken in this district is Maithili. Most local people associate the name of the district with Saptakoshi river, particularly with its destructive attribute (viz. floods). The word ‘Saptari’ is derived from Sapta (meaning seven) and ari or satru (meaning enemies). Saptari, therefore, means a combination of seven enemies (Das 2056v.s.). According to Das’s study, Saptari holds major religious significance for Hindus. The rise of Ramanandi cult and other sects like Kabirpanthis has had an important impact, especially on the Madhesi people in Saptari¹. However, over a period of time Saptari in general and Rajbiraj the district’s capital in particular was overshadowed by the growth of Janakpur as the major religious site (Das 2056 v.s.).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Saptari district had both economic as well as strategic significance. In the contemporary period however, Saptari largely remains detached from the centre. From the vantage point of Saptari, the state appears distant.

This paper is a preliminary exploration of Saptari district that seeks to explore the historical as well as spatial dynamics of the borderlands between Saptari and Kathmandu and thereby, shedding light on the limits and significance of Nepal’s development paradigm in its borderlands. This exploratory study of Saptari draws on various secondary sources such as newspapers, and incorporates information from primary sources such as interviews conducted in Rajbiraj during two years of field work in the district.

¹ The spread of Ramanadi sect occurred during the 16th and 17th centuries when both devotional and tantric disciplines were attributed to Ramanand. Monasteries of the Ramanandi sect are found today throughout the states of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Maharastra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh as well as in the Nepal Valley and the Nepali Tarai. The sect included both Twice Born Hindus as well as members of the servant and untouchable castes, women, and perhaps even Muslims. It is assumed that Rai Das, and Kabir was influenced by Ramanand as their ancestor. Burghart (1978) and Dwivedi (1965) presents early expansion of Ramanadi sect in the Ganga Basin.

This paper is limited in its scope as it only discusses the marginalization of Saptari from the development paradigm of Nepal. Particularly this paper does not delve into the political developments vis-à-vis Madhes movement of recent past of which Saptari has been a central space historically. Also the possibility of political connections of Saptari and the role of such politics in the marginalization of Saptari is out of the purview of this paper. Since the fieldwork was also largely conducted in Rajbiraj, this paper accords centrality to Rajbiraj in locating Saptari vis-à-vis Kathmandu. The paper thus seeks to answer the questions: how did Rajbiraj in particular and Saptari in general fall behind so significantly in terms of development? By exploring the historical and contemporary changes in Rajbiraj and Saptari at large, the paper seeks to understand the reasons which led to stagnation of this part of the country.

An Overview

Siraha and Saptari were collectively known as Saptari district until 2022 B.S (1965 AD), following which they have been operating as two separate districts. During the separation process, a part of Saptari was merged in Siraha (Das 2056 v.s.). Hanumannagar was the district-headquarters of the united Saptari² until 1994. When Hanumannagar suffered severe damages owing to Koshi river floods in 1994, the headquarters was then shifted to Rajpurmauja which was later renamed Rajbiraj after the ancient Rajdevi temple located east of Rajbiraj town.

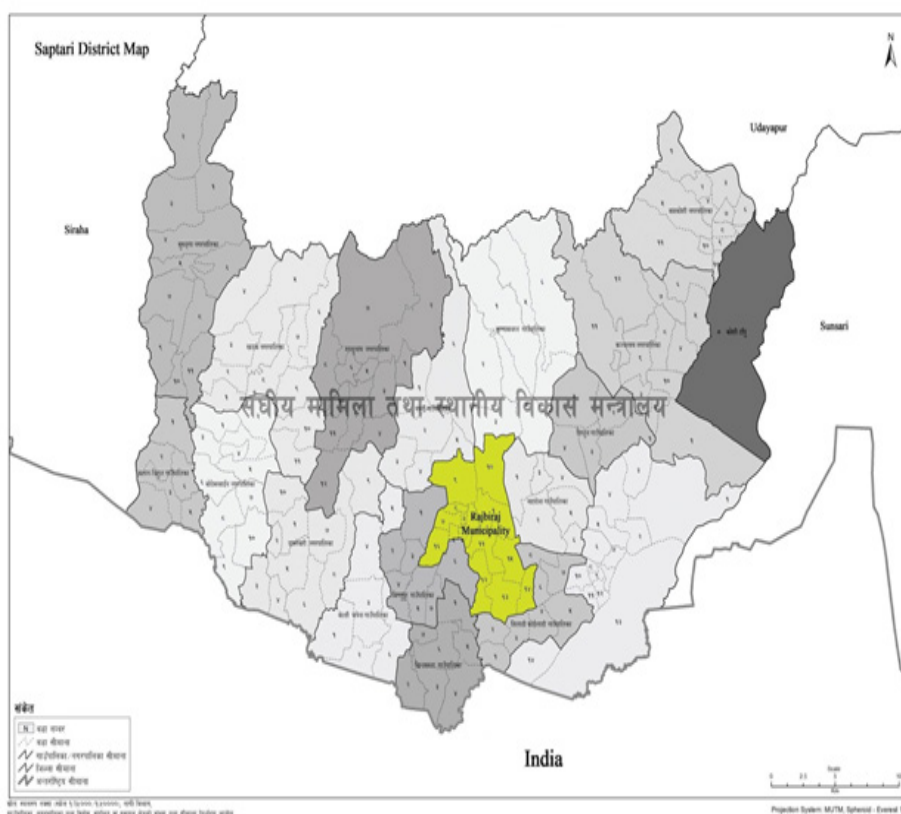


Figure 1: Saptari District Map (Source: Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, Government of Nepal 2018; retrieved from: http://103.69.124.141/images/District_Map/Saptari.jpg)

² The old Siraha-Saptari has been termed united Saptari.

Saptari at the Margins

Rajbiraj, the district headquarter of Saptari, has the distinction of being among the first planned townships in Nepal. The township was designed in 1938 and was modeled after Jaipur city in India. One of the first airfields in Tarai was also built in Rajbiraj. In 1959, Saptari district became the first district of Tarai (and the fourth in all of Nepal) to have a municipality. It was also among the 'A' listed districts³ in terms of revenue, population and strategic importance (Guneratne 2002).

In fact, Saptari was ahead in many other ways. The first irrigation canal, Chandranahar, was established in Saptari. The district also boasts one of the longest barrages in Nepal popularly known as Koshi barrage. The first batch of law colleges in Nepal was established in Saptari district. These colleges produced some of the earliest lawyers of the country. Rajbiraj also served as a trade centre, occupying a prominent place in the economy. With the Hulaki highway connecting Rajbiraj with Kunauli, Rajbiraj emerged as a cross-road between two vibrant towns of Bihar: Darbhanga and Purnea. People of inner Tarai and from hills often came to Saptari either to pursue their education or as a transit place while going to India for study. However over the period of last 50 years Rajbiraj has seen a slow decline. Unfortunately, this town bears no sign of its previous glory in its present state as evident in the comment of a Sitaram Jaiswal at the Kunauli border:

Up until 1970s this place used to be full of vehicles. The market was huge and vehicles like jeeps, rickshaw, tanga used to line up here to take people across the border. This used to be the only convenient route to connect towns like Darbhanga and Purnea. But now other roads have developed within India so people do not need to take this road anymore. This area is submerged due to flood during monsoon. Snakes bask on the road. Besides, there is no business anymore.⁴

Today, Saptari is one of the least developed districts in Nepal with the Human Development Index (HDI) of .400 - .499 (NPC 2014). At present it has the highest educationally disadvantaged in a total population of According to a survey conducted by Gerlitz et.al (2015), Saptari has the highest multidimensional poverty, with a headcount of 85%. The story of Saptari is representative of the plight of most Tarai towns. These towns have seen similar stagnation over time with the change in regimes' policies.

The Agrarian Saptari

The major source of Nepal's income was agricultural production for decades until the Panchayat regime came in place. The bulk of the agricultural products came from Tarai with the eastern Tarai accounting for the largest production in rice, jute, oil seeds and sugarcane. The economic importance of the Tarai is captured by the available data on rice trade. According to a study conducted by the Ministry of Economic Planning in 1965, the Tarai districts produced 59.9 percent of Nepal's cereal grains and 97.3 percent of

³Nepal categorized districts into three categories: A, B and C as per their revenue generation capacity, population and strategic importance.

⁴ Interview with Jaiswal on February 16, 2017.

Nepal's exportable surplus. Rice production was the highest in Eastern Tarai, and Saptari was among the highest rice producing districts (Gaige 1965; Sri Panchko Sarkar 1965 and Regmi 1964). The major impediment identified by the government in fostering agriculture was poor connectivity within the country. Hence, the first five year plan of Nepal (1956-1961) allocated 33 percent of the total development budget to Transport and Communications. The government also introduced a plan for the construction of 4000 miles of road over the period of 20 years realizing that the development of Nepal is not possible unless there is a regular supply of goods and labor across the country. However, only 300 miles road was constructed (Pant 1957). The construction of the east-west highway connected Tarai only with the cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara in the hills, a far cry from its earlier promise of connecting the two regions (the hills and Tarai) altogether (Brown 1996). The local economic condition thus could not improve due to the lack of efficient planning vis-à-vis the money spent for the development initiatives of the district. Data also suggests that a huge imbalance remain in annual proposed development budget and actual expenditure that varies from proposed annual budget of around 5 hundred thousand cores to the actual expenditure limiting to less than a hundred core (Annual District Development Planning Book 22067/68, 2069/70, 2070/71, 2072/073, 2073/074, District Development Committee's Office, Rajbiraj). This is further reflected by the ex-mayor of Rajbiraj Mr. Govind Singh:

Rajbiraj had the scope of becoming a feeder market for the hill districts such as Udaypur to Khotang. However, the government did not see this as important and made no effort in linking Pahad and Tarai to facilitate a greater integration of the economy of Tarai with Pahad. Back in 1980s when I urged the King to construct the Hulaki highway, he dismissed my request saying that there was no need of another highway when one (Mahendra Rajmarg) was already in place to connect Tarai and Pahad.⁵

The first five-year plan achievements show that the roads constructed did not directly benefit Rajbiraj or Saptari. The roads constructed included Bhaire-Raxaul, Sunauli-Pokhara, Kathmandu-Janakpur, Nepaljung-Surkhet. None of these roads connected Rajbiraj with the hills (Pant 1957). The plan also did not envisage the construction of Hulaki highway which could be a lifeline for the entire Tarai region. The highway could have been particularly beneficial for Rajbiraj for it would allow the town to be connected with the east-west highway and places further afield. As it is apparent, Nepal's planning has failed to envisage a comprehensive plan to integrate the economy of Tarai with that of the hills. Towns like Rajbiraj have suffered the brunt of myopic planning and bleak economic integration, a fact that continues to this day.

The Rice Basket and Politics of Land

Tarai region produces the largest share of surplus food in Nepal. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the agricultural surplus was exported to India as Nepal's agricultural products had a high economic value in the Indian markets. Most of the rice exported to Purnea district of India was produced in eastern Tarai. Timber and lumber were also exported via rivers like Sarda, Rapti, Gandak, Bagmati and Koshi which largely balanced trade in favor of Nepal (Guneratne 2002). Most of the surplus was collected from the

⁵ Interview with Govind Singh on February 20, 2017.

villages by local businessmen and eventually sold in India. Hence, border-towns became an important hub for the local traders and businessmen to store their food like rice and cereals before taking them across the border (Gaige, 2009). The government, for its part, collected revenue from 118 custom posts located along the border in the Tarai districts which constituted about 70 percent of the total revenue collected by the government of Nepal (Gaige 1965). Rajbiraj was one among these custom points which made it a busy town with rice-mills and storage facilities along the border.

Agriculture was the backbone of Saptari district. The economic vibrancy of the district was predicated on its trade with India along the border. However, multiple factors impeded the industrialization of Saptari. One of the reasons can be attributed to the early railway expansion project by the East India Company. This project expanded its railway lines to Biratnagar which became a new trade route to Purnea. The North-Western Railway line connected towns like Nirmali to Darbhanga district and connected Nepal frontier by road as this section was the major provider for rice grains traded at Madhubani of Darbhanga district. Thus, towns like Biratnagar, Birjung and Nepalgunj were the major places to benefit from the railway connectivity expansion in India (Tiwary 2008). Rajbiraj, however, did not benefit from this arrangement as it is located 10 km away from the nearest border town of Kunauli which is about 35 kms away from the nearest railhead in Nirmali. This made trade of raw materials difficult. Owing to this arrangement, the road connecting Kunauli and Rajbiraj remains in a dilapidated condition. Kashi Yadav running hotel on the Nepal side of Kunauli border pointed out, “the market area is completely submerged during the rainy season making the roads impassable. This has affected the economic activities like trade, shopping, etc. Even the custom officers flee from here during the monsoon season.”⁶

The lack of economic development can also be attributed to the semi-feudal structure of Saptari district. Neither the traditional traders nor the agricultural classes could develop themselves as industrial entrepreneurs in Rajbiraj. On that account, Rajbiraj bears significant resemblance with Bihar of India. The structure of Bihari society is similarly semi-feudal. In the past, the feudal leadership in Bihar opposed any radical tenancy reform and remained indifferent to indigenous industrial development. This semi-feudal structure was largely responsible for the failure of sub-national economic awakening in Bihar (Gupta 1981). Similar stagnation can be seen in the case of Rajbiraj. Unlike in Bihar, the political sub-national awakening appeared quite early in Rajbiraj. However, the economic awakening was severely stunted by the pre-existing feudal structure and the failure of the reform in tenancy rights. Moreover, the land-reform program launched by the government of Nepal had serious loopholes, creating a room for manipulation on the part of the landlords to secure their interests. The lack of record on the existing land-holding pattern with the government of Nepal made things further worse. The land-reform program was thus dependent on the land-holders who were to declare their land-holding themselves. Taking advantage of the loopholes, the landlords often managed to make paper-based transfer of their lands among their faithful which helped them to retain their land-holding. Therefore, the government’s land-reform program neither brought significant change in the land-holding pattern nor did it alter the prevailing feudal relations. The lack of a proper land-reform program only pushed the peasants further into penury leaving them with no land entitlements. Hence over the period of time agricultural workers could not exercise their given

⁶ Interview with Yadav on May 12, 2017.

rights to have occupancy of land and there was minimal possibility for employment of these landless agricultural labourers outside agriculture (Zaman 1973). As land was the main source of power and money back then, it was the landed aristocracy who dominated the local society and institutions (Regmi 1964). A local journalist explained:

All the leaders from Madhes were from the land-owning class. Such families exist in Saptari till date. The babausahebs (Rajputs) still have large land holdings. They send their children off to America and England for higher education but dalits are still landless and struggle for everyday living. They are bound to migrate in search of employment in other countries and those who cannot afford to go abroad, go to India for wage labor work.⁷

This feudal structure is still in place. A study in Morang district adjoining to Saptari shows that the number of absentee landlordism (land owners who are not based in the place where they own land) is as high as 73 percent. Such a system in turn has affected the ability of the tenants to control the surplus they produce, forcing them to make do with a bare subsistence living (Sugden and Gurung 2012).

The implications of this can be observed clearly in Rajbiraj today. The pace and scale of labor migration has increased substantially with the development of east-west highway which further led to the emergence of economic zones along the highway. With the decline in agriculture, an essential input for agricultural growth, irrigation has been largely neglected underpinning the deterioration of agriculture that pushed a large number of agricultural workers to search for employment beyond agriculture.

By 1980, Nepal became a net importer of rice from a net exporter. This was due to the fragmentation of land with the increase in population. This partly failed the land reform program. This got further aggravated in absence of appropriate irrigation facilities and lack of opportunities in agriculture sector. The resulting spike in farmers' debt prompted a large number of people to take up foreign employment. Furthermore, the industrialization drive led to the concentration of agricultural production in the hills relegating Tarai to the backdrop. The creation of five development regions, to decentralize the resource concentration in Kathmandu and the eastern Tarai while developing new towns in other areas, failed to bring change in the overall living standard (Whelpton 2005). The commercial establishments in other areas partly absorbed laborers from the rural areas. However 10 years long Maoists conflict displaced a number of industrial settlements and gradually Nepal has also shifted to remittance economy and Saptari today is the seventh largest migrant sending district (ILO 2014).

The industrial area of Rajbiraj is an example of failed industrialization drive in Nepal due to lacking tangible incentive provided by government. The lack of an enterprising investment culture among the large-scale manufacturers in the district led to stagnancy in the industrial sector in Rajbiraj. The industrial area of Rajbiraj was set up in 1986 with the help of the Government of India (Paswan 2017). The ex-mayor of Rajbiraj who was also involved in the designing of the industrial area explained:

⁷ Interview with Shiva Narayan in Rajbiraj on February 24, 2017.

There was no vision on why the industrial area was being established. It was clear then that this area would fail as there was no way of acquiring raw materials for production. The nearest rail head in India was 35 kms away and the highway was 7 kms away. The cost of any product made here would be very high and therefore, most businessmen would not be interested in investing here. Finally this site has turned into a place for protest and agitation.⁸

The neglect is apparent with the fact that this industrial area was the last among the 10 industrial areas run by the government to receive power hotline, guaranteeing power, during the business hours. The Maleth estate has an electrical capacity of 25 kVA (approximately 25 kW), which is the smallest in the country by magnitude (Paswan 2017). However, the industrial area manager maintained that the power supply is intermittent and the power requirement for sustaining industries cannot be met without a separate power supply grid. Despite being one of the oldest industrial areas of Nepal, the industrial area in Rajbiraj stands out as one of the failed projects. This particular case illustrates the inefficient planning of industrial development by the state. The lack of long-term vision has been a constant issue in the industrial development planning of Nepal. While subsidies were provided to support the growth of cottage industries, no effort was made towards their improvement in quality to compete in the international market. In addition, the subsidies and levy on import duties were provided on an ad hoc basis (Pant 1968). As per the manager of the industrial state, “the industrial area has remained unyielding and runs at the deficit of 7 million rupees per year. As a result, all the rice mills that existed earlier died out.” For this the problem of planning and development has been a national issue in Nepal.

Although Nepal did make efforts in the early development planning phase to support industrial growth, factors like administrative difficulties, connectivity issues and organizational issues as well as lack of capital thwarted the entire process. Though integrated economic development was envisioned, it was never implemented on the ground. Thus, from the view point of an economic and developmental perspective town like Rajbiraj gradually became stagnant.

The Koshi Project

In the agrarian milieu of Saptari, the Koshi project came with a great hope of development. However, the primary concerns of the general public were related to the issues of flood control in Koshi and the supply of electricity in every household (Dixit 2008).

The ex-mayor of Rajbiraj explained:

The Koshi project had increased the importance of Rajbiraj. The Indian officials deputed to work on the project were allocated a separate settlement area during the construction of the barrage. An entire area was separated for the settlement of these officials. Currently, the Election Commissioners’ office is housed in that area. Their presence made sure that good doctors, medical and educational

⁸ Interview with Govind Singh in Rajbiraj on May 13, 2017.

facilities were available in the area which also benefitted the general public. All these changes made the town vibrant with the constant movement of people within the town and across the borders.⁹

But eventually this site too became a contested one and hope out of the Koshi project had dried up. The Koshi Treaty of 1959 with the Indian government reads that the government officials including Chief Engineer will be appointed by India to work on the project and all facilities needed by the officers will be provided by the Indian government. Article 12 mentions that India shall give preference to Nepali labor and article 13 states that India shall establish schools, hospitals, provision of water-supply and electricity, drainage, tramway lines and other civic amenities in the project territory of Nepal (Art. 13).¹⁰

The treaty stipulated that Nepal could use water from the barrage for irrigation and other purposes as per its necessity. It also specified that Nepal could use up to 10 percent of the electricity produced from the barrage. However, this barrage is hardly in Saptari's favor. The complete control of the water lies with India due to which bureaucratic hurdles arise when supplying water to Nepal for irrigation. Only six-thousand-hectare land on Nepal's side gets water for irrigation. In addition, the technical problems in the construction of the irrigation canal often cause stagnation of water impeding the flow. The Koshi barrage has therefore benefitted Nepal only minimally with regard to irrigation. Besides, it has not provided much relief from the flooding problem long faced by the residents of Saptari (Dixit 2008). Koshi floods are recurrent and destructive. There have been two major floods in past 10 years: in 2008 and most recent one in 2017. These floods have had affected hundreds of lives and thousands of hectares of crops. Clearly, the Koshi project failed to improve the economy of Saptari. It rather enmeshed Saptari into the larger geopolitical tussle between India and Nepal.

Rajbiraj suffered from the same fate with the decline of greater Saptari. It got transformed over time to what may be defined as semi urban locality due to its physical distance from institutions for governance, economic foci and political power centre as well as transport terminals and manufacturing centres that was initiated previously. However along with Rajbiraj being developed as a semi urban centre, it has contributed in increase in transportation costs, especially for building materials. An important condition for local businesses to grow is the availability of skilled labor. However, there is no sufficient access to skilled labor in the remote towns of Tarai. As a result, such towns often lag behind in development as they fail to attract investors and migrants alike (Potrnov, Adhikari & Schwartz 2007). The decline in population has been quite apparent in Rajbiraj. While the economic stagnation has contributed to population decline, population decline has also reinforced economic stagnation. As a local shop-keeper in Rajbiraj explained, "Almost all marwaris have fled from here due to security reasons. Now even the Yadavs, who constitute a majority, are fleeing from this area due to the lack of education and health facilities. Everyone who has some capital are buying land in Biratnagar and if possible, in Kathmandu to settle there. People do not want to stay here. And if there are no people, how will businesses make profit?"¹¹

⁹ Interview with Govind Singh in Rajbiraj on May 17, 2017.

¹⁰ Agreement on the Koshi Project between Nepal & India, Kathmandu, April 25, 1954. This agreement is available at: https://www.indianembassy.org.np/water-resources/agreement_on_the_Kosi_project_bet_nepal_india_kathmandu_april25_1954.pdf; accessed on February 7, 2018.

¹¹ Informal conversation with a local grocery store owner in Rajbiraj on May 19, 2017.

In the case of Rajbiraj, one can notice the inter-linkages between the town's decline in strategic importance, the dynamics of local population and the increasing instability of the region both economically and politically. With the persistence of political turmoil and instability at the local and regional levels, it is evident that the development of the district has considerably suffered. While residents of Saptari have long felt the need to devolve administrative power down to the districts from the centre, the centralized national politics has only kept Saptari in the margins of the national life. For instance, although Rajbiraj was declared the zonal headquarters of Sagarmatha zone, the regional directorate for Saptari's civil services was placed in Dhankuta and the zonal offices for civil services in Diktel. Both Dhankuta and Diktel are the hill districts. The location of the zonal office for civil services in Diktel and the strategic placement of administrative offices around the highway are reflective of the government's skewed priority in planning. People from Rajbiraj are therefore forced to travel a distance of 39 km and go to Lahan for simple things like motor vehicle license renewal. Hence, Saptari has been made distant to the power centers resulting in its current marginalized status. Rajbiraj thus presents a case of paradoxical relationship between macro and micro-economic development. The centralized state structure of Nepal and the national bureaucracy focused largely on designing policies to address the national interests has further influenced in keeping Rajbiraj stagnant. This contributed in failing to address the local-level interests on the ground. The emphasis on the macro-economic development was largely ignored leaving the local-level economy disintegrated from the national economy. This further resulted in high urban-rural disparity in development and integration. Thus, towns like Rajbiraj now exist at the margins of the development paradigm.

Conclusion

As it stands, the development of Saptari remains largely stagnant. At one point of time, Saptari used to be a strategically and economically important district. Rajbiraj town located in Saptari district was once a bustling town with various activities of trade and commerce. The town held a great promise of prosperity. Unfortunately, Rajbiraj is now the shadow of its former self. Interplay of various factors has led to its stagnation on socio-economic, political and even cultural domains. For one thing, the diversification of market and trade routes in the region at different points in history eroded Saptari's erstwhile prominence. Moreover, the failed land-reform program and the lack of alternative source of income as well as model of development pushed Saptari further towards the margins.

In Saptari, the developmental works were initiated within a system created and controlled by the centralized power. The undue emphasis on macro-economic development resulted in the general neglect of a vibrant micro-economic presence. The Kathmandu-centered authority structures and institutions largely focused on the national issues but failed to take into consideration the constellation of interests emerging at the local level. Today, Saptari is being developed within the structural constraints of a previous socio-economic system marked by a feudal order and unequal distribution of resources. Thus, Saptari presents a representative case of failed development framework of Nepal vis-à-vis Tarai.

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