



## Powers at the Periphery: An Exploration of the Strategic Political Position of the Borderland Population in Madhesh

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: 31 Oct 2025

Accepted: 20 Jan 2025

#### Keywords

Nepal-India border

Borderland

Cross-border exchanges

Strategic political position

Border security

### ABSTRACT

*The oft-extolled socio-cultural and economic exchanges between the borderland population in Madhesh and the population across the border constitute a cornerstone of the enduring relationship between Nepal and India. The perpetual exchanges between the borderland populations engender fluid identities and associations of the population common to both sides. These cross-border exchanges—and the resultant identities and associations—have become a hallmark of ambivalent mainstream perceptions towards the borderland population in Madhesh, and are at times framed within the broader national security concerns. These subdued yet pervasive perceptions, when combined with shifts in Nepal–India relations, often culminate in calls for limiting exchanges with India at the grassroots and national levels. Contrary to the prevailing national discourse, this article argues that these historic exchanges between the borderland populations are a prominent means of leverage in Nepal's pursuit of sustained security. The enduring cross-border exchanges significantly reinforce common interests and identities across the border, diluting divisions arising from territorial boundaries, including asymmetries in political and economic power between the two countries—much to Nepal's advantage. Drawing on a case study of the everyday lived experiences of the borderland population in Mahottari, the article explores the significance of the cross-border exchanges and underscores the 'strategic political position' of the borderland population in safeguarding Nepal's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.*

### Introduction

The southern borderland areas are unique spaces in the overall Nepali socio-political and economic context. Often lauded as 'breadbasket' or the 'lifeline' of the Nepali state, it simultaneously is a zone of extreme inequality, chronic underdevelopment, and looming security threats at both the local and the national levels (Bhatta, 2024a). Nevertheless, the Terai historically has complex relationships with the state ever since the formation of the Nepali nation-state in the mid-eighteenth century. During the unification process of Nepal, the Madhesi population received limited attention, influenced in part by Terai's geographic proximity to India, and perceived cultural and spatial difference from prevailing visions of

the Nepali nation-state (Gaige, 1975). The subsequent governments, including the Ranas, Panchayat, and the democratic ones continued to shape citizenship practices in the Terai in ways that contributed to enduring distinctions between the region and the state (ICG, 2007). In response, Madhesi people have periodically demanded redress—most prominently through the Madhesh Andolan (Hachhethu, 2007). These demands, protests, and the evolving Nepal-India relations within these frameworks, have fueled anxieties and wariness within a section of state apparatus, and by extension with a segment of the hill population (Sah, 2017).

The Nepal-India relation is mutualistic with commonalities emerging from geographical proximity, historical interactions, shared challenges, and emerging prospects and risks, formalized through diplomatic instruments as the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. This relationship however, remains inherently paradoxical (Shukla, 2006), oscillating between periods of closeness and detachment (Tripathi, 2019). Within this context, the Madhesi people, especially the borderland communities' daily socio-cultural, political, and economic exchanges with the Indian borderland communities, constitute the epistemic and affective foundations of prevalent ambivalent perceptions toward Madhesh. During shifts in Nepal-India relations, these perceptions have at times contributed to calls from mainland political elites and communities to limit Nepal's grassroot and national exchange with India, including proposals such as partial or increased restrictions on the open border system (Pattanaik, 1998). The academic discourse on Nepal-India relations similarly tilts toward depicting the asymmetries between the two states, and demanding closure or heavy securitization of the open border system (Bhattarai, 2023; Karki & KC, 2020).

This article in response argues that, while institutional frameworks such as the Peace and friendship treaty structurally privilege India, and that the open border is not without its security concern for Nepal, the prevalent discourses overlook the many, albeit uneven, ways in which Nepal benefits from borderland-related policies and practices. Long-standing cross-border exchanges significantly reinforce common interests and identities across the border and dilute divisions arising from territorial boundaries, including asymmetries in political and economic power between the two countries—much to Nepal's advantage. In this context, the borderland population serves as the human conduit and stabilizing interface, facilitating the relations between the two countries. Drawing on a case study of the everyday experiences of the borderland population in Mahottari, the article explores the significance of the cross-border exchanges and underscores the 'strategic political position' of the borderland population in safeguarding Nepal's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.

The article advances by setting context of the research problem through extensive literature review in the next section. Section 3 details the methodological framework employed in the research. Section 4 presents the major findings of the research, which are subsequently analysed in Section 5 by situating them within the broader body of borderland scholarship. The article concludes in Section 6 with a synthesis of the key findings and an outline of avenues for future research.

## Context

### ***The controversial yet celebrated Roti-Beti relationship between Nepal and India***

The centuries-old people-to-people relations between Nepal and India, their socio-cultural, political, and economic exchanges, have engendered a unique relationship often romanticized as *Roti-Beti* relation (literally “bread and daughters,” reflecting both economic transactions and social ties, such as intermarriages, that bind the two nations) (Gupta, 2009). This *Roti-Beti* relation is the foundation of the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship which endorses the open border system (Shukla, 2006; Baral, 1992; Singh & Mamta, 2011) and continues to inform India’s contemporary initiatives, like the Neighborhood First policy. These arrangements are across three principal domains: security cooperation, people-to-people connectivity, and economic exchange (Baral, 2012).

Despite significance, these treaties are widely interpreted in Nepal as prioritizing India’s security and trade, often at the expense of Nepali national interest (Basin, 1970). The recurring tensions- including the 2015 unofficial blockade, territorial disputes, asymmetrical trade practices, negative media portrayals of Nepal in India, and perceived Indian interference in domestic politics- have factored discontent in the Nepali mainland. The discontent with India often simultaneously relates to Nepal’s own citizens in Terai, whose enduring *Roti-Beti* affiliations with India are simultaneously valorized for their cultural and economic significance and problematized as potential source of political vulnerability.

### ***The southern borderland at an epicenter of Nepal’s relations with India***

Terai is primarily inhabited by a mix of indigenous people like Tharu, Rajbansi, Dhimal and people of Indian origin (often called Indian Madhesis) who migrated to Nepal prior to the 1950s from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Nayak, 2011). These communities maintain strong cross-border linkages across the border. While such transboundary exchanges position borderland populations as vital intermediaries in sustaining bilateral relations, they simultaneously undermine their relationship with their state.

Gaige (1975) defined Terai as an important, yet geographically and culturally distinct region of Nepal that complicated national integration efforts. These dynamics influenced state approaches to the region, with implications for the Madhesi population’s participation in mainstream political and economic life, contributing to their sense of being on the margins of national affairs. In response, the Madhesi population has periodically organized movements to advocate for their rights, most notably through the Madhesh Andolan.

Periodic protests, such as Madhesh Andolan are sometime perceived by a section of state leadership and a segment of hill communities as influenced by India (Jnawali, 2022), raising concerns about potential challenges to national unity (Nayak, 2011). The perception deepened following the 2015 Constitution and the ensuing unofficial blockade, leading to renewed debates about limiting certain exchanges with India—most notably discussions around the management of the open border system. These narratives however, overlook that the borderlands are unique spaces-distinct from centre, where exchanges and ties with both sides of the border are crucial to sustaining lives and supporting vital national interests.

### ***Understanding the borderland beyond line of separation between states***

Borderlands are not merely places adjacent to state's rigid demarcation but are increasingly realized as a permeable space enclosing groups with common identities and interests (Newman, 2003), shaped by policies and practices of both countries (Baud & van Schendel, 1997; Diener & Hagen, 2012). The statement rings true in the Nepalese context, where communities of common socio-cultural backgrounds maintain cross border exchanges that have fostered unique identity of the Nepali borderland community, -often termed as hybrid or fluid identity (Newman, 2011; van Schendel & de Maaker, 2014).

Consequently, borderlands transitional spaces in which power, obligations, and social affiliations are indeterminate, constantly negotiated, and contextually contingent (Newman, 2011; Wastl-Walter, 2020). Borderland people have 'strategic political position' (Bhatta, 2024b), as their location at the intersection of states enables them to facilitate access to regional economic markets, facilitating trade flows and shaping diplomatic relations, and national security (Bhatta, 2024b; Plonski & Yousuf, 2018). As such it becomes evident that rather than being "disruptive" sites threatening state integrity, the state can employ the unique position to partner with the borderland community in safeguarding, territory, security, and other vital interest of the state (Bhatta, 2024b).

### **Methodology**

The research was conducted between February and July 2025 in the Mahottari district. Mahottari is a quintessential representation of the southern borderland in Nepal, bordering India where borderland communities on both sides are perpetually engaged in cross border socio-cultural, political, and economic exchanges. The study purposively selected 19 participants deemed important for the study, including local residents, security personnel, political activists and leaders, media persons, and subject-matter experts. Formal and informal interviews conducted with these participants. Care was taken to ensure that the participants either had lived experiences of the borderland and/or were well-informed about the issues central to research. The research has also employed participant observation to garner thick description complemented by extensive literature review. The generated data was manually categorized according to similarities, with patterns noted for their frequency and subsequently analysed.

Given that the research addresses sensitive issues related to national security and diplomacy, this study adheres to strict ethical research practices. In accordance with ethical research guidelines, participant names were altered to maintain confidentiality.

### **Findings**

#### ***Interwoven Lives, Languages, and Livelihoods: Persistent Cross-Border Interdependence between Mahottari and Indian Borderland Communities***

Lives, livelihood and languages on either side of the border are deeply connected. Mahottari district shares approximately 36.8 kilometers of border with Madhuwapur, Kanva Sursand, and Bela in Bihar, India. For most borderland people however, the "border"—so heavily emphasized in state discourse—holds little significance beyond its role as a physical marker

of the No Man's Land separating their communities. For example, Ram Kumar, a resident of Mahottari, begins his day with tea prepared using milk sent by his sister across the border. He crosses the border countless times each day to visit relatives, access markets, or socialize. Similarly, Balaram reflects on the porous nature of the boundary, recalling:

“When we were kids, we would play *gilli danda* or football with our friends and relatives from the both sides. While playing *gilli danda* we would often cross border many times without even noticing, and in football, one goal post would be on Nepali side and the other in India. Interestingly the teams would never be divided as Nepal and India.” (B. Nepali, personal communication, June 3, 2025)

In these borderlands, linguistic commonalities- such as Maithili, Bhojpuri and Hindi-facilitate communication, trade, and social exchange, further reinforcing these ties. Religious and cultural practices similarly transcend national boundaries, as communities jointly celebrate festivals. Dashera in Mahottari and Madhuwapur involve priests from Madhuwapur worshipping Durga Idol in Mahottari and vice-versa, followed by the submersion of idols in Laxmisagar pond in Mahottari. Laxmisagar pond is also a common worship site for Chatt festivities. Similarly, during Madhimiki parikrama, a Hindu pilgrimage walk, worshippers transverse approximately 133 km along the borderland- 30Km in Madhuwapur, India and 100km in Mahottari and Dhanusa, Nepal.

Borderlands are also thriving space for economic exchange. Communities depend on cheaper prices of goods and employment opportunities on the Indian side, while Nepali minimum wage provision attracts Indian workers to the Nepali construction and industrial sector. Cross-border business investments are further facilitated by kinship ties spanning both sides of the border. For instance, Ram Bhajan, an Indian national with maternal ties to Mahottari, co-manages a clothing business in both countries, facilitated by his mother's Nepali citizenship.

A specific that predominates in the borderlands is informal trade. Janaki, a Nepali citizen, works as “carrier” purchasing goods at a cheaper rate in India and reselling them at a slightly higher rate in Nepal. As a single mother this is her sole source of income to support her family of five members. The buying and selling are facilitated by her relatives and friends on either side of the border. These trades are viable source of income for some Indian nationals, particularly those with disabilities who face barriers to formal employment in either country.

Agricultural practices also dilute the rigidities of formal boundaries. Harijan, a Nepali resident of Mahottari, owns half a bigha of land in Nepal and approximately one and a half bigha across the border in Indian territory. His case is not a unique, as many borderland residents have land on either side, a practice permitted under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Harijan, cultivates land in both countries, utilizing labour and resources of both sides. Rather than creating difficulties, cross-border landholding has provided advantages; for example, he can acquire fertilizers that are often scarce in Nepal through Indian channels, thereby enhancing his agricultural productivity.

For people like Rambhajan, Harijan, Janaki, Ramkumar and Balaram whose daily life are tightly closely intertwined with the cross-border ties, the psychological barrier of ‘us’

and ‘them’ barely exists. The largely imperceptible physical and psychological boundary has generated fluid and hybrid identities, characteristic of borderland communities. These identities give borderland communities a strategic political position, which are in most cases, advantageous to the nation and its vital interests.

***Beyond Roti-Beti: The Borderland Communities Strengthening National Interests***

“The people to people contact between our nations power not only culture, but also customs, who lead business and indeed, every sector, including defense” (General Bipin Rawat, Indian Army, NIICE, 2020).

As noted in the preamble of the 1950 Nepal-India Peace and Friendship, the agreement recognizes “the ancient ties which have happily existed between the two countries for centuries” (Government of India & Government of Nepal, 1950). Further, these ties are also the foundation of economic treaties and policies, such as neighborhood first. This relays that the *Roti-Beti* ties drive diplomatic relations between the neighbors beyond its socio-cultural significance.

The importance of these ties is evident in everyday conflicts and emergencies. The Matihani (Mahottari) and Madhuwapur (Bihar) borderlands are relatively undeveloped and often overlooked in terms of state’s investment, and mostly lacking in vital resources. Consequently, communities and authorities collaborate during times of distress. For example, in 2024 there was a massive fire that destroyed 106 houses in Nepal, prompting joint efforts by Nepali authorities, the Armed Police Force (APF), Nepal, Indian firefighters, and Sasastra Seema Bal (SSB). In a similar line of argument, a young Indian politician noted:

Even though we are restricted by our government policy from directly helping Nepal but we find ways to support each other. For instance, we organize interstate cricket to help train Nepali youngsters and facilitate interaction with Indian players, we also help defuse various disputes, working alongside security forces on either side, as well as instances of unrest. (R. Srivastava, personal communication, 3 June 2025)

The unrest referred by the young leader include increasing political and religious disruptions affecting communities on both sides of the border. The open border has a persistent threat of political interference from India to Nepal and vice versa. During electoral periods, concerns over voter fraud arises from both sides. To curb the issue, APF Nepal, Nepal Police and SSB rely on local informants on either or both sides to identify potential irregularities. According to local security personnel, possible criminal activities like smuggling and looting on the Nepali side have at times been prevented due to timely information by the locals on India and Nepali side. Similarly, religious tensions that are becoming increasingly common in the border are mediated by community-level interactions involving actors from both sides.

Importantly, these ties have been an exhaustive soft power in times of diplomatic crisis, particularly when national security and economic stability were under strain. During the 2015 economic blockade, Indian traders and local people, facilitated the entry of goods into Nepal through informal channels. Several larger traders were instrumental in easing and eventual opening of the border to allow movement of goods and people. Deepak Agrawal, an Indian trader recounts:

By the third day of the protest, the trucks carrying goods—especially perishables—had become a liability, threatening losses for traders on both sides. Our business on both sides plummeted in the first month itself. People in Nepal were scrambling for essential goods like petrol. Many of our families and businesses are in Nepal as well. We couldn't simply stay quiet. Some of us traders started pressuring the local government and security forces to help ease border restrictions. While the pressure insufficient to fully open the border, it did contribute to loosening restrictions. We also learnt that a delegation of larger traders went to Delhi to lobby the central government to help lift the blockade. In my understanding, these collective efforts contributed to the eventual opening of the border. (D. Agrawal, personal communication, 7 June 2025)

Local accounts similarly emphasize cross-border ties central to sustaining Nepal during the blockade. Despite border restrictions, the borderland communities in Mahottari relied on their friends and relatives across the border to facilitate the informal movement of good and essentials including fuel, into Nepal. As one local politician said:

Had the borderland population not ensured the movement of the essentials within the country, Kathmandu and much of Nepal would have faced severe shortages and escalating inflation during the blockade. (A. Mohammad, personal communication, 7 June 2025)

Significantly, these ties play an exhaustive role in containing conflicts that might otherwise escalate into larger disputes particularly those related to border demarcation. In Mahottari, the locals on both side report of possible encroachment of their land on either side during the demarcation process although no official tension ever exists. Nevertheless, such disputes rarely escalate into overt conflicts. For example, a local government officer in Nepal constructed a government office in the No Man's Land, based on claims that the official border markings were inaccurate. The authorities on both sides subsequently coordinated to manage the situation and prevent escalation, contrasting with the trajectory of comparable international border disputes elsewhere. Similarly, a Nepali Musahar community has been residing on No Man's Land for decades. The security force on both sides is trying to convince the community to relocate elsewhere rather than forcefully evicting or resorting to violence. These are testimonies that people-to people relations along the border foster a sense of shared identity, responsibility and common goal amongst the borderland people including the authorities on both sides.

Borderland populations occupy strategic political position wherein their unique geographical, social, and political location confers a form of leverage that can either support or challenge the state, depending on nature of relationships with state institutions and with cross-border communities. The case of Mahottari clearly reveals that the inhabitants are utilizing their strategic political position to serve nations vital interests. However, evolving policies and practices of both countries increasingly threaten these exchanges and by extension, the soft power that they confer.

***Disruption, disintegration and implications: The changing socio-political dynamics of the borderland communities***

Lives along the Nepal–India borderlands are profoundly intertwined, yet some state policies on either side often have reciprocal and adverse effects on everyday life. The change in oft celebrated social exchange is a powerful illustrator. Differential policies and shifting socio-political dynamics increasingly limit inter-community interactions, particularly intermarriages

between Nepali and Indian borderland populations due to complex citizenship arrangements. Similarly educated women on both sides are increasingly against inter-state marriage, as language barrier (Nepali or Hindi) often restricts their employment in government institutions in respective countries across the border.

Changing economic policies on either side of the border also restricts cross-border exchange. For instance, Nepal's 2064 Customs Policy levies taxes on goods valued above NPR 100 imported from India. In Mahottari, particularly in settlements such as Samsi and Matihani, residents rely on affordable goods from India for everyday subsistence. Customs policies aimed at curbing illicit trade inadvertently criminalize survival strategies, intensifying socio-economic precarity, and to an extent, disrupt traditional cross-border exchanges.

The fluctuating ties between the two countries, particularly in recent times, pose significant challenges for historically interdependent Nepal-India relations, and by extension to the lives at the borderlands. On economic front, according to some locals, the political unrest in Madhesh and 2015 blockade adversely affected Indian investment in Mahottari. While the decline in economic or social exchanges may appear minimal at present, its gradual erosion might adversely affect securing national interests that are directly related to exchanges and the people-to-people relations.

Security concerns including cross-border crime, arms and narcotics trafficking, illegal migration, and potential extremist networks- are more pronounced in the borderlands, periodically prompting some politicians, critics, and segments of the mainland population to call for increased securitization or closure of the open border. Although most borderland communities perceive benefits of an open border to outweigh drawbacks, discourse within Nepal advocating tighter border regulation emerges from multiple quarters, including politicians, academics, activists and lay people (Bhattarai, 2023).

Legitimate security concerns notwithstanding, increased securitization of the border rarely achieves comprehensive security (Plonski & Yousuf, 2018). Importantly, these calls not only undermine the importance of exchanges facilitated by the open border in everyday life of the borderland population, but also fails to recognise that the ties and exchanges constitute soft power Nepal has leveraged for its advantage. As one Mahottari based journalist explained:

Nepal's border with India has a lot of security issues and the two states must collaborate to address this pressing issues. However, the socio-cultural and economic contribution of the exchanges between the two borderland populations far outweigh any such disadvantages. (K. Yadav, personal communication, 23 Dec 2025)

The journalist further noted that when political elites and mainland residents advocate for increased securitization-or, more radically the closure of open border-it reflects a persistent disconnect between state-centric security discourses and the lived realities of people in Madhesh. Same sentiment was echoed by majority (12) participants and summarized by a local politician who stated:

Nepali state in recent times, has been improving its relation with the Madhesi population, particularly following the federalization of state and increased representation of Madhesi people. However, these achievements risk being undermined if border-related issues are not handled pragmatically. Border exchanges are integral to lives of borderland population, and also contributes significantly

in maintaining socio-cultural, economic, and political ties with India. Any policies that disrupt these exchanges could provoke substantial local resistance. The state must be much more attentive to the needs of Madheshi people. (R. Kumar, personal communication, 23 Dec 2025)

## Discussion

Mahottari exemplifies a typical southern borderland community in Nepal with a rather peripheral albeit improving relationship with the centre, and a closer socio-cultural and economic relationship with the population across the border, a pattern common to most borderlands (Newman 2011; van Schendel & De Maaker, 2014). As noted in previous borderland studies, the everyday cross-border exchanges of the borderland community such as those in Mahottari and their counterparts across the border, have engendered a “hybrid” identity (Baud & van Schendel, 1997; Diener & Hagen, 2012) among populations on both sides, as their lives, language, livelihood, oscillates between two states (Newman, 2011). These hybrid identities foster common goal and interests, including similar socio-cultural goals and similar concerns for security, as observed in many borderland communities (Newman, 2003). These identities and the physical and psychological distance from the state given a complex history, have simultaneously resulted in ambivalent mainstream perceptions towards the borderland communities like Mahottari.

The article has demonstrated that despite their complexities with the state, borderland communities like Mahottari have subtly utilized their unique geographic position much to Nepal’s advantage. They have leveraged their ties to the other side, to mitigate gaps in employment, sustenance of livelihood, health care and education that the state alone could not fully address. Such ties have been instrumental in advancing national interests, particularly in addressing security concerns, territorial claims, and complex social, political, and religious disputes. Notably, during the 2015 unofficial blockade, grassroots ties across the border illustrated a critical strategy for Nepal in countering unequal and unfavorable policies and practices with India. Therefore, rather than limiting and restricting exchanges or closing the open border system, the state could strategically capitalize on these exchanges to reduce disparities in diplomatic arrangements and strengthen Nepal-India relations.

At the same time, the threats arising from the open border system like trafficking, smuggling, third country interference, and spill-over conflicts from across the border, can also be managed through collaboration between the two states and their security organizations. Within this framework, the borderland communities can partner security organizations from both states to build a robust security mechanism. In this regard, it is imperative that Nepal realise the strategic political position of the borderland community and invest in gaining further confidence of these vital agents of soft power, through policies and programs that address the chronic and persistent underdevelopment and poverty that exists in the region.

## Conclusion

The oft-extolled *roti-beti* ties—encompassing economic exchange, kinship bonds, and social networks are cornerstone of deep but paradoxical Nepal-India’s political relationship. As close neighbors both countries are indispensable for each other- for India, Nepal is a strategic partner

for its security, while Nepal as a landlock nation depends on India for trade and commerce. Yet, in recent times, particular since 2015, Nepal-India relations have experienced fluctuations, posing challenges for stability and security of both nations.

The borderland communities of the Terai occupy a strategic political position within these developments, as their location at the intersection of states makes them essential for facilitating trade, sustaining cross-border livelihoods, and strengthening local security networks. They have also demonstrated their vital role as informal mediators and sources of intelligence, helping to prevent conflicts and manage issues of significant security concern. As such, they embody Nepal's soft power and play a critical role in mitigating tensions while advancing national interests within an asymmetrical regional order. The state and the mainstream population, wary of insecurity posed by the open borders must thus recognize that limiting exchanges through increased securitization or closure of open border system could not only adversely impact the lives of the borderland population, but also jeopardise national interest that directly correspond to these vital exchanges. Security concerns, meanwhile, can be more effectively managed by partnering with the borderland populations.

The borderland community of Mahottari, while a quintessential representation of borderland communities in Nepal, does not comprehensively cover diverse conditions of borderlands throughout Nepal. Everyday life in these regions is shaped by varied internal and external dynamics, and is contextual to each borderland. Future research on Nepali borderlands should explore these varied complexities situated in diverse borderlands and their implication for Nepal-India relations. In so doing, the studies must shed light on the important but overlooked everyday dynamics of the borderland population.

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