



ESSAY
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The Nepal-India Border and Borderland Communities Under COVID-19

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There is an open border regime between Nepal and India since centuries. But all the border-crossings have been closed dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The number of Border Observation Posts increased from 120 to 500 to obstruct movement. So the daily activities of borderland communities were affected.

Introduction

The Nepal-India Boundary is 1,880 kilometres long, with an open border regime. It has twenty major border crossing-points. Before the pandemic, Nepalese and Indian inhabitants could cross the porous border from anywhere many times a day without any obstruction or interrogation.

There are more than six million Nepali people working in India in various capacities such as security guards, domestic workers, hotel restaurant waiters, industrial guard, porters, agriculture helpers, etc (Nagarik Daily,

4 August 2014). In the same way, about four million Indians work in various parts of Nepal as school teachers, carpenters, masonry workers, plumbers, electricians, furniture makers, etc (Madhukar Shumsher JBR, FPRC Journal, 2014(3) www.fprc.in). They could come and go from their homes for their livelihoods without any problem. If border police suspected anyone, proof of identity was enough to pass.

It was generally not necessary for Nepali and Indian citizens to show identity proof nor to keep records of the movement of people while crossing the international border before the COVID-19 pandemic. But the border has been closed from both sides since 24 March 2020 when the pandemic started to spread. The border is still formally restricted, even though the lockdown officially ended on 21 July 2020. Nevertheless, the local frontier inhabitants can cross the border on foot. Border police do not stop them. Cargo trucks with foodstuff, fruits, vegetables, and merchandise are permitted to enter from either side. However, passenger vehicles have still been restricted. The number of armed police personnel patrolling has increased to obstruct the movement of “non-essential” borderland inhabitants.



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Study Area

My case study area is around the Belhi-Sunauli (Nepal-India) crossing-point. I have been to and from Indian towns many times through this point before COVID-19. This is one of the major crossing gates through which 1.28 million travelers crossed from India to Nepal and 1.36 million people entered into India from Nepal during the year 2018-19, the year before COVID-19 (Immigration Officer Giriraj Khanal and Area Police Inspector Bir Bahadur Thapa, Belhi).

Just three days before the lockdown, 16-to-18 thousand Nepalese, who worked in India, commuted across the border daily through this crossing-point (Kantipur Daily, 22 March 2020). When the lockdown started on 24 March, nearly 335 Nepalese were stranded in the Indian frontier, as the border was closed.

There are police posts, immigration and customs posts, and armed police personnel patrolling along this Belhi-Sunauli border crossing-point. Before the pandemic, Indian frontier inhabitants used to come to Bhairahawa Nepali weekly open market to sell their farm products such as vegetables, fruits, milk, ghee, and other consumable goods at a higher price. Nepalese borderland community people would go to the Indian Sunauli market to buy sugar, salt, spices, daily necessities, and cotton clothes at a cheaper rate in comparison to Nepali market. But these usual activities have been obstructed due to spread of the coronavirus.

Border Filtering Process

Immigration office, customs post, and police check-posts personnel have been stationed in all 20 main border crossing-points along the Nepal-India border. Before COVID-19, Nepalese and Indian nationals could cross the international border without interrogation. They wouldn't have to enter immigration check-points. But third-country nationals had to face the immigration office.

Major Customs Offices were established to check the third-country travelers and to provide visa facilities. Armed police patrolled along the border to deter illegal activities. However, unwanted elements misused the open border. Criminals committed crime in one frontier and could easily hide on the other side. Terrorists used to cross the border in a disguised manner as Nepali/Indian inhabitants, as those who had their attire, posture, food habit, language, as similar to either Indian or Nepali. There were cases of smuggling of goods and electronic materials, trafficking of girls and women, narcotic trafficking, export of fake Indian currency notes brought from third countries to Nepal and then India. These unwanted elements would try to infiltrate the porous border rather than through the main crossing-points. All these happenings were due to less vigilance and low numbers of armed police personnel along the border.

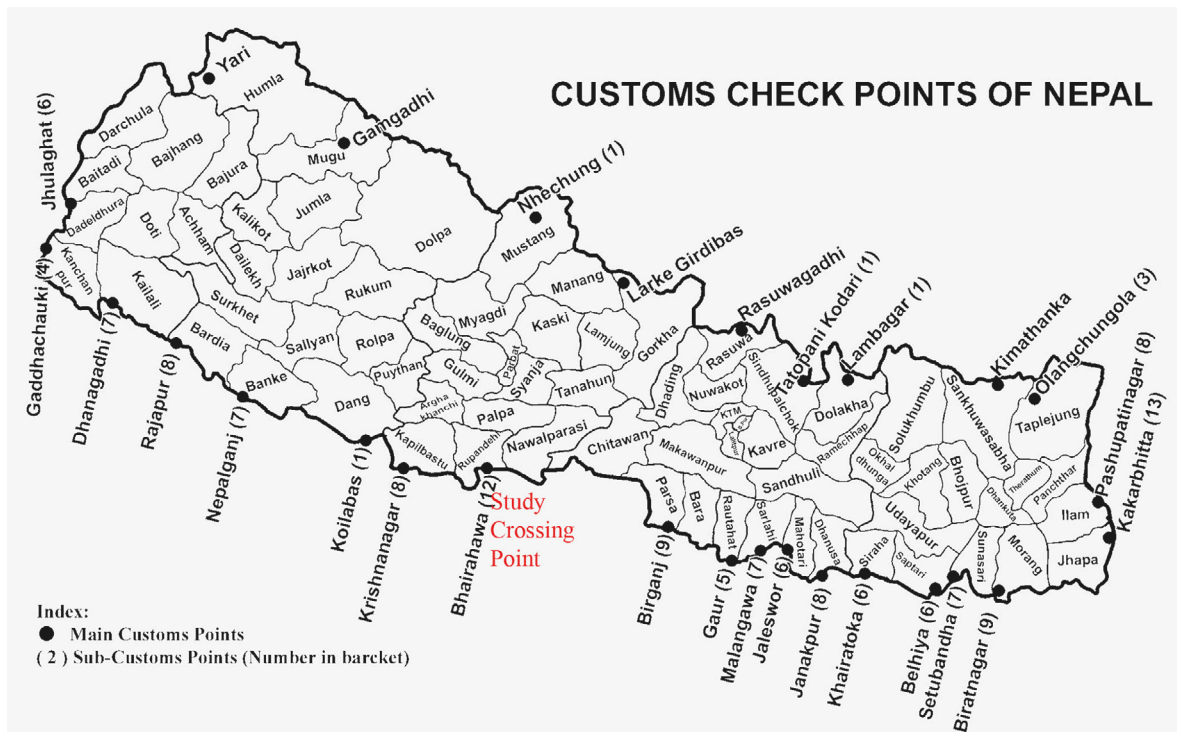


Figure 1. Map of Locations of Customs Offices and Sub-Customs Points (Nepal-India and Nepal-China). Source: the author, from the book *Border Management of Nepal*, 2003, 69.

Border Management System Changed Because of COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, the situation of border management system has been changed dramatically. The open and porous border was changed into a completely closed border system on both sides.

Formerly, Nepal had deployed 5,000 Armed Police Force (APF) along the border, establishing 120 Border Observation Posts (BoPs), six-to-ten kilometers apart in the plains and eight-to-fifteen kilometres apart in the hilly region. It had deputed 40 APF personnel in each BoP on average. Whereas India had deployed 45,000 special security bureau (SSB) with 530 BoPs, two-to-four kilometres apart having 85 personnel in each BoP. There were deputed immigration and customs officers, intelligentsia, and security personnel in the border crossing check-points.

After the lockdown was announced on 24 March 2020 by both countries, movement was restricted on both sides. Border-point officials, in a sense, have much less work as the movement of travelers and frontier inhabitants has been restricted. On the other hand, there have not been sufficient numbers of health officers and social workers.

In course of time, there were nearly 500 Nepalese stranded at the Indian frontier, as the border was restricted. They were harassed, because they were under lockdown into the closed door. There was not sufficient food and drink inside. When they tried to go out the door, policemen would strike their heads with wooden batons. However, those who were eligible were permitted to enter the Nepali frontier after general health checks by means of thermal guns, rapid diagnostic tests (RDTs), and polymerase chain reaction (PCRs).

Nepal border security forces expanded to 22,000 personnel from 8,000. It added 320 temporary BoPs to make 500 during the pandemic to obstruct the movement of people from India. A ban on walking across the border was enforced except in emergency situations. However, special passes were provided from the local body and district administration to borderland communities to attend funerals and ritual events.

Management After the Formal End of Lockdown

The lockdown was ended on 21 July 2020 in Nepal, with some restrictions in areas heavily hit by the novel coronavirus and continued suspension of public transport vehicles. However, the Nepal-India border crossing-gates are still closed officially and restricted for the movement of people by land as well as air. The Nepalese government has decided to continue the

ban on people's movement across the border with India and China until 15 December 2020 (Himalayan Times Daily, 20 November 2020). Now the number of BoPs has gone down to 175 with 10,000 armed police personnel. Nevertheless, the Nepalese are going to Indian cities for their jobs, as they were out of work in their hometowns and other cities of Nepal. According to border area security personnel, more than 140 Nepalese crossed the Gaddha Chowki border-point on 17 November 2020 to go to their work place in India (Kantipur Daily, 18 November 2020).

The borderland communities are not happy, as the border has been closed for the last eight months. Border closures also affected weddings of borderland inhabitants. For example, twenty-year-old Nepalganj Municipality inhabitant Ali Shaiyad's marriage has been stalled for months. Originally scheduled to tie the knot with a boy across the border in April, the wedding keeps being postponed due to the border closure and pandemic (Himalayan Times Daily, 24 November 2020).

COVID-19 in Nepal

The first COVID-19 affected person in Nepal was detected on 23 January 2020. The first case of death was on 16 May. By 21 July, when the lockdown relaxed, fatalities reached 80 and the infected number increased to 23,948, whereas 16,664 people (75 percent) recovered. From 22 July to 14 August in a three-week period, the death rate increased by nearly 20 percent. Now, the total test (PCR) is 1.67 million, and the identified confirmed cases are 222,288 persons and among them 202,067 have been recovered. The total death through 23 November was 1337 patients. Staffing in hospitals and temporary health centers have been increased tremendously and they are busy many hours a day. In the same way, border security forces and BoPs increased along the border. But the immigration personnel at border check-points have sat idle, with the border formally closed.

Feeling of Borderland Communities During COVID-19

Indian frontier community people have been aggressive during COVID-19, due to barring them from crossing the border for their daily livelihood, such as taking domestic animals to the other frontier for grazing and grass cutting. A group of 40 Indian community inhabitants tried to infiltrate the Nepali frontier from the Malangawa Municipality Bhediaryi crossing-point. Armed police BoP personnel stopped them towards Indian frontier. But they were furious and hurled stones and logs at Nepali armed policemen. An Indian national attacked the Nepal Armed Police Force constable who was patrolling the border on 22

April. The policeman was wounded on his head. In the meantime they were driven away with the help of Indian SSB personnel.

On 23 April, eight Nepali nationals returning from India forcefully tried to enter into Belhi, Nepal. Nepal Police took them into custody and they were sent back from where they had entered and ultimately handed over to Indian Police. They were taken to Subash Chandra Junior High School quarantine center at Sunauli No-man's land. They were examined by RDTs, PCRs, and thermal guns. On the other side, a 43-year-old Indian national and another 35 years of age fled from the Nepal Siddharthanagar Municipality-3 quarantine on 23 April.

Conclusion

The Nepal-India border cannot be closed for ever, but neither it should be entirely open. Borderland community inhabitants of both countries have close relationships with each other since historic times in terms of kith and kin, pilgrimage, and social factors. In fact, the border must be regulated during and after COVID-19. There should be designated exit and entry points along the border. ID cards should be introduced while crossing the border. It should establish coronavirus check-up desks with sufficient health workers and necessary materials near border gates. All travelers must be thoroughly examined to determine whether they carry the coronavirus. If virus-infected Nepali passengers have been identified, they should be obstructed and sent to local quarantine camp. If some of them are Indian nationals, they should be handed over to Indian health desk. After rigorous health checking, they should be permitted to enter into the immigration desk.

Now, a new mechanism should be introduced at border crossing-points. In the immigration corridor, digital cameras with a stand should be fitted over desks. Travelers must put their identity cards or citizenship certificates on the desk under the camera. Then they should proceed out of the corridor to cross the international border. At the same time, they should be monitored by CCTV cameras from inside the corridor and digital images should be saved in the monitoring wing. If he/she is suspected as a recorded criminal or red corner noticed terrorist, they must be interrogated. Images of notorious criminals should be displayed on the wall of the immigration corridor. This system/mechanism could check and arrest international criminals and terrorists on the border-point and prevent them from misusing the international border. But it should be managed in a regulated way for the movement of borderland community people to strengthen the people-to-people relations between Nepal and India.



Figure 2. Photo by author.