

Geography and Administrative Structure of Saptari District

Introduction:

Saptari is a highly fertile, flatland district in Nepal's Outer Terai (Madhesh Province), covering 1,363 sq. km. Flanked by the massive Sapta Koshi River to the east, it features a rich agricultural economy, tropical climate, and biodiversity hotspots like the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve. Saptari is regarded as "Heart of Mithila". Rajbiraj is considered as "Pink City" because it was the very first systematically planned township in the country.

Boundaries

East: Sapta Koshi River, which also forms a natural provincial boundary.

West: The Balan River, separating it from Siraha District.

North: The hilly expanse of Udayapur District and Mahabharat Range.

South: Supaul and Madhubani districts in Bihar, India.

Latitude/Longitude: Extends to roughly 26°34' North latitude and 86°45' East longitude.

Geographic Proximity & Cross-Border Integration :

Diplomatic Dynamics: Flood adaptation and the construction of cross-border embankments (dams) dictate regional relations. These structures can sometimes lead to disputes regarding waterlogging and inundation of land on both the Nepali and Indian sides.

The Open Border: The lack of natural physical barriers facilitates an intertwined socioeconomic lifestyle. Communities on both sides cross the border frequently for employment, healthcare, and education.

Shared Hydrology & Environmental Hazards : Due to the low-lying, flat topography, cross-border water flow is a major issue. During monsoons, rivers flowing from the Himalayas through Nepal. Sapta River changed its path with high flow of hydro-water resistance in cross-border waterlogging induction of flooding near Indian villages causing several disaster activities.

1. Major River Systems

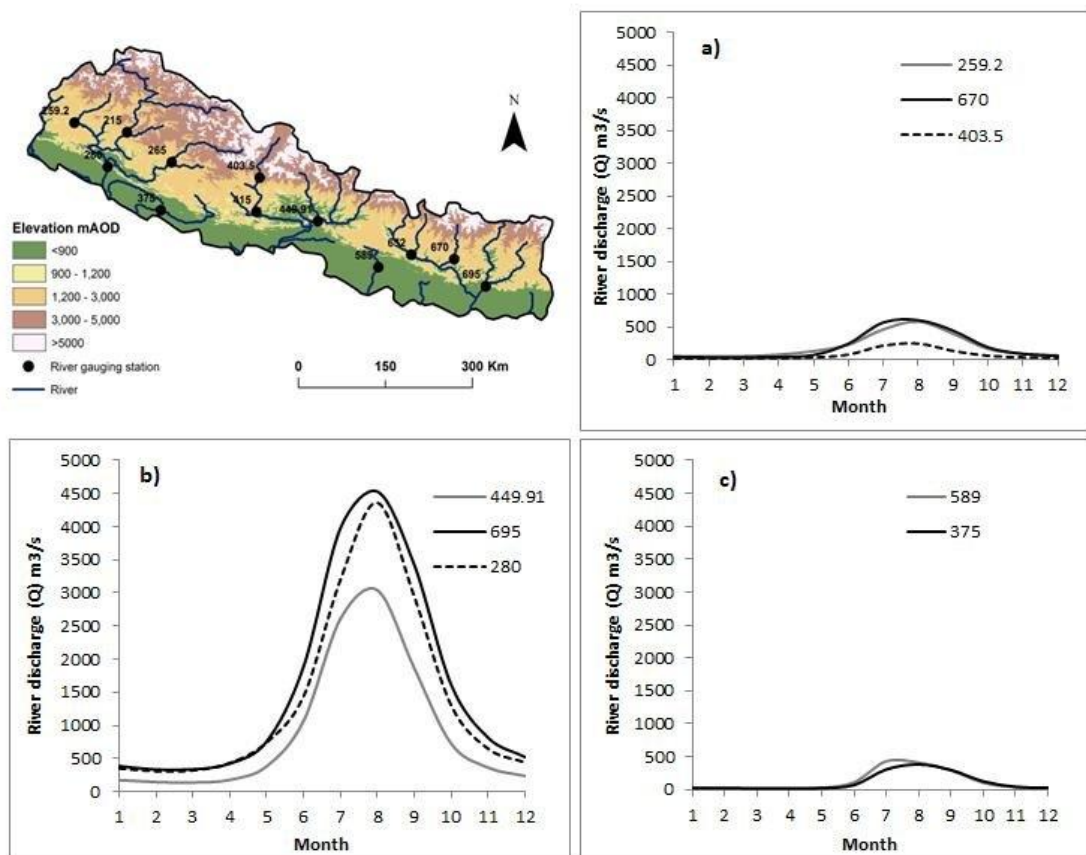
Saptari is geographically framed by major rivers on its eastern and western borders, with numerous smaller seasonal streams in between:

- **Saptakoshi River:** Forming the eastern boundary of Saptari, this is Nepal's largest river system. It consists of seven major tributaries (Sun Koshi, Indrawati, Bhoté Koshi, Dudh Koshi, Arun, Tamur, and Likhu). It carries massive sediment loads from the Himalayas and exhibits high flow rates, playing a dominant role in the region's hydrology.
- **Balan River:** Flowing along the western border of the district, this is a flashy river originating from the Siwalik (Chure) Hills.
- **Khando River:** Originating in the Chure range, this 25.2 km river passes directly through the district before draining into the plains. It has a catchment area of roughly 117.3 km² and is heavily prone to flash floods during the monsoon season.
- **Mahuli and Jita Rivers:** These are smaller, seasonal rivers originating from the Siwalik range, traversing the central parts of the district before dissipating into the Indo-Gangetic plain.

2. Hydrological Zones & Dynamics

The district's topography shifts dramatically from steep, sediment-producing slopes in the north to flat plains in the south. This creates distinct hydrological zones:

- Upper Catchment (Zone 1): The steep upper reaches of the Chure hills are high-energy sediment collection zones. Rainfall runoff is rapid, causing heavy erosion.
- Midstream (Zone 2): Rivers meander through the midstream region, frequently shifting channels, causing riverbank erosion, and endangering nearby settlements.
- Downstream Saptari (Zone 3): As the rivers hit the flat Indo-Gangetic plains, their slopes decrease significantly. Sediment dispersal slows, causing riverbeds to rise and leading to severe, widespread inundation.



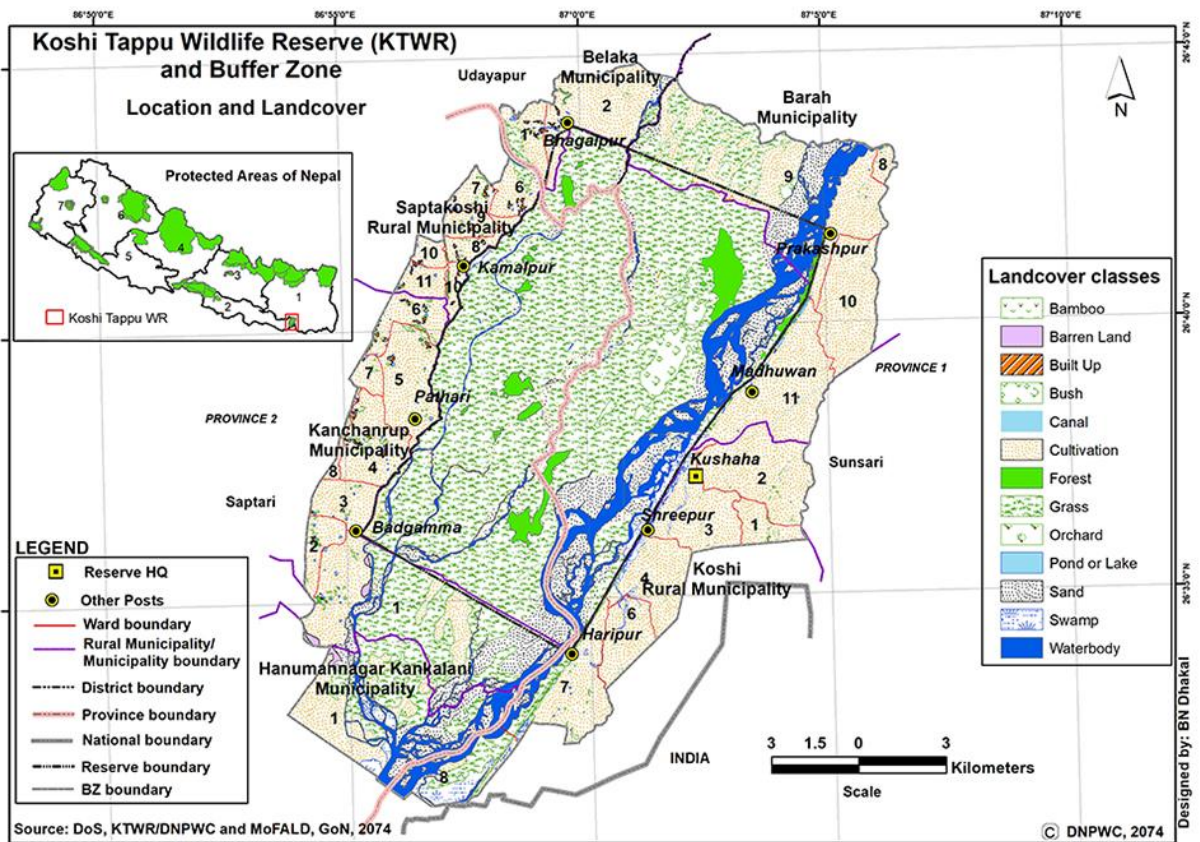
River flow hydrographs for the main river types in Nepal a) tributaries rising from the high mountains and Middle Hills b) main rivers downstream of tributary confluences c) small rivers rising from the Siwalik Hills. Gauging station numbers and locations are indicated. River flow data provided by Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, Nepal. Elevation data USGS (2004) Shuttle Radar Topography Mission.

Koshi Tappu lies between the coordinates of $26^{\circ} 56' - 26^{\circ} 40'$ and $85^{\circ} 56' - 87^{\circ} 04'$ in the floodplains of the Koshi river. It covers an area of 348 sq.km, including the buffer

zone of 173 sq.km. It was designated as a Wildlife Reserve in 1976 and is under the jurisdiction of the [Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation](#).

Some characteristic features:

- It is the first [Ramsar site](#) of Nepal, designated in 1987.
- The Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve safeguards the pristine riparian wetlands, cattail fields, mudflats, grasslands, forests, marshes and swamps, lakes and ponds, and excavated ponds. Some of the flagship species found in the reserve are the globally threatened wild water buffalo called ‘arna’ in Nepal (*Bubalus bubalis arnee*), the Gangetic dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*) and endemic fish species (*Barilius jalkapoorei* and *Pseudeutropius murius*). Other globally threatened fauna include nilgai, smooth-coated otter, and red-crowned roof turtle.
- Koshi Tappu is also one of the [Important Bird Areas](#) (IBAs) of Nepal. It is a haven for birds such as swamp francolin (*Francolinus gularis*), Baer’s pochard (*Aythya baeri*), pallas’s fish eagle (*Haliaeetus leucoryphus*), greater spotted eagle (*Aquila clanga*), lesser adjutant (*Leptoptilos javanicus*) and spot-billed pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*).
- There are about 215 settlements in the vicinity of the wetland. The inhabitants depend on the wetland for irrigation, livestock grazing, fisheries, and food production, and obtain construction materials from the forests.
- Major threats are feral cattle grazing, flooding and siltation, wildlife depredation, and illicit trade.



The reserve lies in the floodplain of the Sapta Koshi River incorporating Sunsari, Saptari, and Udaypur districts of eastern Terai of Nepal. It lies at an elevation of 75 m – 81 m above sea level.

Land Use and Coverage Breakdown

- **Cultivated Land:** Approximately (65%) of the district's land area is used for agriculture, making it one of the largest "granaries" in the Terai region. Major crops include paddy, wheat, and maize, though recent shifts toward vegetable farming have also been recorded.
- **Forest Area:** Around (15% to 16%) of the district is covered by forests (or about (204 km²), particularly spanning the northern Chure (Siwalik) range and areas

bordering the Koshi River. This is relatively lower in forest density compared to the hilly or mountainous districts of Nepal.]

- **Wetlands:** Saptari shares a massive portion of its protected aquatic ecosystems through the globally renowned wetland habitats of the Koshi River.

Rajbiraj at risk: Misplanning Nepal's oldest planned town

The vision, values and goals of urban planning and highway alignments in this new century demand a paradigm shift from the traditional mode of town-planning, which is to say an altogether new strategy that incorporates the principles of deep ecology. If a planner in or out of his mind comes out with a plan to drive in a 50-metre highway through the very heart of Kathmandu's capital in the name of development, what kind of pandemonium could it set off among the valley populace and the hue and cry it might bring? Most would dismiss it as just wild fantasy or plain daredevilry. A similar hoax that is hardly less macabre failed to raise eyebrows recently among the designers of highways and decision-makers in Nepal's south-east in Saptari when a coterie of self-declared developmentalists tried to impose their design on the oldest township planned in Rajbiraj.

The public there were not informed on what was about to happen, leave alone the larger issues at stake. Neither the government nor the civil society was coming forth on the agenda: secrecy was serving the conspirators' interests better, not transparency nor the information that was the citizens' inalienable right on what was going to matter for them. The only information made available was a dire warning to leave and move away. No assurance for settlement, no compensation. Appeals against the encroachment proved a cry in the wilderness. Rajbiraj happens to be the town planned as a miniature Jaipur, the Pink City of Rajasthan in India. It emerged in the course of rehabilitating Hanumannagar, the district headquarters of Saptari, which was flooded by the River Koshi. It was in the news first in the early Forties when Jay Prakash Narayan and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya, fugitives from Hazaribag Jail and imprisoned in Hanumannagar jail, were set free by the rebels. Heavy floods in the late Thirties had forced the residents to settle 12 kilometres

west, and the urban structures, including the ancient shrines and other cultural assets, were shifted. Declared a municipality in 1960, this eight-decade old town was now facing a dire threat from ‘planners’ bent upon driving a highway right through the core of the town, which would not only raze hundreds of households there, but would also uproot, displace and drive away families who had been born, had grown up and lived there for generations. If the perpetrators were least mindful of the collateral damage the decision would bring to the heritage value of the town, to the air, to the peace and the tranquility of the township when traffic would grow, one could hardly imagine a more dastardly project. Development, after everything said or done under its pious promises and proclamations, stands only a hair’s breadth away from destruction. Ignorance, the saying goes, is bliss and silence golden. Ignorance of the would-be victims of Rajbiraj was, instead, turning into bane, and their desperate silence the development-mongers were sharpening into a murderous tool in their frantic bid for the loot the framers of this fraudulent scheme had in mind. The funnier part of the game was that quite a few of the local administrators, hand in glove with some of the leaders, would not flinch from becoming the greatest fraudsters in the history of the district. This is what the two scribes of this write-up discovered, rather late when one of them was in town on a short visit there and was met by a group of six anxious citizens who told him what was cooking. Yet it was still not too late. Consultation then followed on the crisis with a wide range of resource persons, consultants, advocates, jurists, administrators, architects and town designers for months in Kathmandu, with teams shuttling between Rajbiraj and the capital for quite awhile. And efforts to move ahead against the sinister agenda concluded in a decision to file a case in the Supreme Court for a writ to stay the demolition. This, fortunately, worked. The two-some, in fact, failed to find a single soul among the dozen distinguished persons consulted who would go with the malicious plan to destroy the townscape instead of opting for a far more creative and far less costly option of ring-roading Rajbiraj. One of them, the planner of a township in western Nepal, could not help marveling at the excellent design and grid-plan of Rajbiraj.

Administration

The district consists of eighteen [municipalities](#), out of which nine are urban municipalities and nine are [rural municipalities](#). These are as follows:

- [Bodebarsain Municipality](#)

- [Dakneshwori Municipality](#)
- [Hanumannagar Kankalini Municipality](#)
- [Kanchanrup Municipality](#)
- [Khadak Municipality](#)
- [Sambhunath Municipality](#)
- [Saptakoshi Municipality](#)
- [Surunga Municipality](#)
- [Rajbiraj Municipality](#)
- [Agnisaira Krishnasavaran Rural Municipality](#)
- [Balan-Bihul Rural Municipality](#)
- [Rajgadh Rural Municipality](#)
- [Bishnupur Rural Municipality](#)
- [Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality](#)
- [Mahadeva Rural Municipality](#)
- [Rupani Rural Municipality](#)
- [Tilathi Koiladi Rural Municipality](#)
- [Tirhut Rural Municipality](#)

Former Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Municipalities

- [Arnaha](#)
- [Aurahi](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 6
- [Babhangama katti](#)
- [Badgama](#), Vagni maleth
- [Bainiya](#)
- [Bairawa](#), now Kanchanrup Municipality ward no. 1
- [Bakdhauwa](#)
- [Banarjhula](#)
- [Banaula](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 10
- [Banauli](#)
- [Baramjhiya](#), now Kanchan Rup Mun.
- [Barhmapur](#)
- [Barsain](#)
- [Basbiti](#)
- [Bathnaha](#)
- [Belhi](#) now Khadk Mun ward No 2
- [Belhi Chapena](#)
- [Bhagawatpur](#)
- [Bhardaha](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.

- Bhutahi, now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 4
- Birpur Barahi
- Bishariya-Bhelhi
- Bodebarsain Municipality
- Boriya
- [Brahamapur](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 7
- Chhinnamasta
- [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality
- Dauda
- [Daulatpur](#), Now surunga Mun Wada No 3
- Deuri
- [Deurimaruwa](#)
- [Dhanagadi](#)
- [Babhangam katti](#)
- [Dharampur](#), now Kanchan Rup Mun.
- [Dhodhanpur](#), now Kanchan Rup Mun.
- [Didhawa](#)
- [Diman](#)
- [Gamhariya Parwaha](#)
- [Gobargada](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Goithi](#)
- [Hanumannagar](#), now Municipality
- [Hanumannagar Kankalini Municipality](#)
- [Hardiya](#) Now surunga Mun Wada No 2
- [Hariharpur](#)
- [Haripur](#) Now surunga Mun wada No 7
- [Inarwa](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Inarwa Phulbariya](#)
- [Itahari Bishnupur](#)
- [Jagatpur](#), now Kanchan Rup Mun.
- [Jamuni Madhapura](#)
- [Jandaul](#)
- [Jhutaki](#)
- [Joginiya-1](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Joginiya-2](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Kabilasha](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 1
- [Kachan](#)
- [Kanchan Rup Municipality](#)
- [Kalyanpur](#) Khadk Mun 6, 7, 8
- [Kamalpur](#), now Saptaskoshi Mun.

- [Kanchanpur](#)
- [Kataiya](#), Now Rupani Gaunpalika
- [Kathauna](#)
- [Khadgapur](#), included in Bodebarsain Mun.
- [Khojpur](#) Now Khadk Mun 5
- [Ko. Madhepura](#)
- [Kochabakhari](#)
- [Koiladi](#)
- [Kushaha](#)
- [Lalapati](#)
- [Launiya](#)
- [Lohajara](#)
- [Madhawapur](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Madhupati](#) now surunga mun Wada no 4
- [Mahadeva](#)
- [Maina Kaderi](#)
- [Maina Sahasrabahu](#)
- [Malekpur](#)
- [Maleth](#)
- [Malhanama](#)
- [Malhaniya](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Manraja](#), included in Bodebarsain Mun.
- [Mauwaha](#)
- [Mohanpur](#)
- [Nargho](#)
- [Negada](#)
- [Odraha](#)
- [Pakari](#)
- [Pansera](#)
- [Jandaul](#)
- [Parasbani](#)
- [Paterwa](#)
- [Pato](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 5
- [Patthargada](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 9
- [Phakira](#)
- [Pharseth](#)
- [Phattepur](#), now Saptakoshi Mun.
- [Phulkahi](#)
- (Parwaha)
- [Pipra \(Purba\)](#), now Kanchan Rup Mun.

- [Pipra \(West\)](#) surunga mun wada No 1
- [Portaha](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Rajbiraj](#) Municipality
- [Rajgadh Rural Municipality](#)
- [Ramnagar](#)
- [Rampur Jamuwa](#)
- [Rampur Malhaniya](#), now Hanumannagar Kankalini Mun.
- [Rautahat](#)
- [Rayapur](#)
- [Rupnagar](#), now Kanchan Rup Mun.
- [Shambhunath](#) Municipality
- [Sankarpura](#)
- [Saptakoshi Municipality](#)
- [Sarashwar](#)
- [Simraha Sigiyaun](#)
- [Siswa Beihi](#) now khadak Mun Wada No 1,2
- [Sitapur](#)
- [Tarahi](#), now [Dakneshwori](#) Municipality ward No. 3
- [Terahota](#)
- [Theliya](#), now Kancha
- [Tilathi](#)
- [Trikola](#)
- [Kankatta](#) now Bishnupur Ruler Municipality Wada no.4
- [Hatti](#) Now Chhinnamasta Ruler Municipality Wada no.7

Saptari District: Cross-Border Trade & Economy – A Theoretical Overview

1. Geographic & Demographic Context

Saptari is located in the easternmost part of Madhesh Province and is one of Nepal's seventy-seven districts. Its district headquarters is Rajbiraj, and it covers an area of 1,363 km². With a population of 706,255 as of 2022, it ranks as the 14th most populated district in Nepal. It is renowned for its agricultural output and is bordered on the east by the massive Sapta Koshi river, on the west by the Balan River, on the north by Udayapur, and on the south by the Supaul and Madhubani districts of India. [Wikipedia](#)

This geography is foundational to understanding Saptari's economy: its southern border with the Indian state of Bihar creates a natural corridor for trade, migration, and cultural exchange.

2. Border Infrastructure & Customs Architecture

The Rajbiraj Customs Office, located in Tilathi Koiladi Rural Municipality, serves as one of the minor border crossings between Nepal and India. It plays a crucial role in facilitating trade, movement of people, and cultural exchange between the two neighbouring countries. The office has seven sub-customs offices – Belhi, Kushaha Pato, Gobindapur, Kodarkatti, Banainiya, Hanumannagar, and Swarnapatti – though only Belhi, Kushaha Pato, and Gobindapur are currently functional. The border town on the Indian side is Kunauli Bazar in Supaul district of Bihar. [Digital Logistics Capacity Assessments](#)

The Rajbiraj–Kunauli crossing is classified as a minor border facility supporting pedestrian and vehicular traffic, but lacks the advanced customs infrastructure found at major ports like Birgunj. Complementing this are sub-customs points and informal routes, including seven additional crossings beyond Tilathi, enabling local exchange but also creating vulnerabilities to unauthorized flows. Another crossing at Phulbariya–Inarwa links to Laukaha in Bihar's Madhubani district, primarily for pedestrian and small-scale trade. [Grokopedia](#)

3. Commodity Flows: Imports & Exports

Key Imports into Saptari

Major goods imported through the Rajbiraj customs include clothes, motor parts, cosmetic goods, and household goods. [Digital Logistics Capacity Assessments](#)

The customs office also handles clearance for textiles, machinery parts, and agricultural products. Revenue collection surpassed annual targets in fiscal year 2018–19 following intensified monitoring to curb evasion. [Grokopedia](#)

Agricultural Trade

Madhesh Province – particularly the districts of Siraha, Saptari, and Dhanusha – is Nepal's primary mango-producing region, with domestic production typically running from mid-May through mid-July. This makes the district both an exporter of certain agricultural produce and a recipient of Indian imports to fill seasonal gaps. [Agro Spectrum India](#)

4. Macro Trade Framework: Nepal–India Relations

Saptari's cross-border economy operates within a much larger bilateral framework.

India is Nepal's largest trade partner. The volume of bilateral trade exceeded NPR 1,134.53 billion (over USD 8 billion) in fiscal year 2022–23. Imports from India amounted to NPR 1,027.84 billion, while exports to India stood at over NPR 106.69 billion – highlighting a substantial trade deficit. Bilateral trade generally takes place in Indian rupees, which is convertible in all banks and financial institutions in Nepal. The two governments regularly convene the Inter-Governmental Committee on Trade, Transit, and Cooperation to streamline market access, tariff harmonisation, customs documentation, and joint infrastructure projects. [The Shillong Times](#)

Saptari, as a border district, directly participates in and is structurally shaped by this macro relationship.

5. Informal Trade & Daily Border Life

One of the most theoretically significant aspects of Saptari's cross-border economy is its informal dimension – the daily movement of goods and people that exists beneath formal customs channels.

For residents of Nepal's southern plains, crossing into India is a routine part of daily life shaped by geography, culture, and necessity. From essentials such as salt, cooking oil, and medicine to higher-value goods, border communities have long relied on Indian markets for supplies, healthcare, and livelihoods. Families on both sides share kinship, cultural traditions, and economic interdependence. Crossing the border can be as routine as travelling to a nearby town. [Kathmandupost](#)

A recent incident at the Kunauli border point in Saptari district illustrates the tension this generates: a group of shoppers returning from India with small quantities of daily goods clashed with Armed Police Force (APF) personnel after their goods were seized for not complying with a new rule requiring declaration of goods above NPR 100. The confrontation has come to symbolise the frustration felt by many in border communities, for whom access to Indian markets is not simply convenience but an important economic reality. Families frequently cross the border to purchase supplies for weddings, funerals, and religious

festivals, with price differences between Indian and Nepali markets often ranging by 20% or more. [Kathmandupost](#)

6. Agricultural Economy & Provincial Context

Agriculture and forestry form the mainstay of Madhesh Province's economy, providing livelihoods for roughly three-quarters of the population and accounting for nearly 40% of provincial GDP. Industrial activity primarily involves processing of agricultural produce – including jute, sugarcane, tobacco, and grain – and contributes about 13% of provincial GDP, while the service sector accounts for approximately 47%. [Fncci](#)

Saptari is well known for its agricultural productivity and fish farming activities, owing to the influence of the Sapta Koshi River. The district is also home to significant cultural landmarks such as the Chhinna Masta Temple, which attracts large numbers of Indian pilgrims – creating a secondary economic flow through religious tourism. [ResearchGate](#)

7. Historical Trade Roots: Hanumannagar

Saptari's trading history predates modern Nepal's economic architecture. Hanumannagar, a municipality in Saptari, was historically invited to wealthy merchants from Bihar's Bhagalpur District to trade in Nepal. Marwari and Deshwali merchants settled there, and the town thrived on trade between India and Tibet, at one point becoming the second largest town in Eastern Nepal. This mercantile heritage underscores how deeply cross-border commerce is embedded in Saptari's social and economic identity. [Wikipedia](#)

8. Vulnerability, Disruption & Political Economy

Cross-border trade in Saptari is not insulated from political shocks. The 2015–16 economic blockade profoundly disrupted the district's border facilities, as Madhesi protesters in Saptari obstructed border entries from September 2015, halting fuel and essential imports and amplifying shortages in the Terai region. The district's reliance on Indian supplies intensified economic strain during this period. [Grokikipedia](#)

More recently, Gen Z protests in Nepal in 2025 affected the flow of goods and people across borders to India, resulting in bottlenecks that disrupted trade — with reports of violence and disruption specifically across the border in Saptari and Birgunj. [The Shillong Times](#)

These episodes reveal a structural vulnerability: Saptari's deep integration with the Indian economy, while economically beneficial in normal times, also amplifies the district's exposure to political disruption.

9. Theoretical Synthesis

Saptari's cross-border trade economy can be understood through several theoretical lenses:

- **Dependency Theory:** Saptari's large trade deficit with India and dependence on Indian consumer goods and agricultural inputs reflects a structural asymmetry typical of smaller, landlocked economies adjacent to larger neighbours.
 - **Informal Economy Theory:** A significant portion of border exchange occurs outside formal customs channels, driven by geographic proximity, kinship ties, price differentials, and regulatory frictions.
 - **Border Studies / Borderland Economy:** The Saptari–Bihar borderland functions as a socio-economic continuum rather than a strict national divide — trade, marriage, religious pilgrimage, and labour migration all blur the line between the two sides.
 - **Agglomeration & Market Access:** The district's location along the Mahendra Highway and proximity to Indian markets gives its agricultural producers and traders market access that is more Indian than it is oriented toward Kathmandu.
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Conclusion

Saptari District occupies a strategically important but economically complex position in Nepal's cross-border trade landscape. Its minor customs crossings, porous informal trade networks, agricultural base, and deeply intertwined social ties with Bihar's border communities make it a compelling case study in subnational border economies. Challenges include infrastructure gaps, trade imbalances, regulatory friction on informal trade, and political vulnerability — but also opportunities in agro-processing, trade facilitation, and leveraging its unique geographic and cultural position within the Nepal–India economic corridor.

