

Saptari Next

Campaign Manual – First Edition (Publication Draft)

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Introduction

Saptari Next is a citizens' campaign that envisions the Saptari district of 2030, 2040 and 2050. Launched on 18 February 2023, the campaign partners with individuals and organisations – at home and in the diaspora – to create a positive, conducive environment for the overall development of the district.

Saptari Next is not a political movement, an NGO project, or a one-off event. It is a long-horizon platform: a shared space where the people of Saptari can imagine the district's future together, and then organise the projects, programs, opinion research and publications needed to get there.

This Manual is the campaign's first publication. It sets out what Saptari Next is, how it works, and what it knows about the district it serves. It is a living document – each edition will be revised as the campaign learns and grows.

Vision: Saptari 2030 · 2040 · 2050

Saptari Next works on three time horizons. The milestones below are a draft framework for discussion with partners and citizens; they will be refined through the campaign's Poll pillar.

Saptari 2030 – Foundations. A district with an active, organised civic society; a functioning endowment fund seeding local enterprises; credible baseline data on the district's people, economy and environment; and the first flagship projects in energy, business promotion and conservation under way.

Saptari 2040 – Transformation. A district recognised as a hub of the eastern Madhesh: reliable local energy production, a growing base of locally-owned businesses and incubated startups, restored wetlands and Chure watersheds, and a generation of young people who see their future in Saptari.

Saptari 2050 – Maturity. A prosperous, resilient and self-confident Saptari – the “Heart of Mithila” – whose institutions, economy and environment sustain themselves, and whose model is studied and replicated by other districts.

Our Approach: Partnership

Saptari Next works through partnership rather than ownership. The campaign's role is to convene, connect and catalyse:

- Individuals – professionals, students, farmers, entrepreneurs, artists and elders who contribute time, knowledge, networks and resources.
- Organisations – community groups, cooperatives, businesses, schools and colleges, local governments, NGOs and diaspora associations that adopt or co-create initiatives.

Focus areas of the campaign include, among others:

- Civic society engagement – organising citizens to participate in public life, local planning and accountability.
- Energy production – promoting local generation and productive use of energy in the district.
- Business promotion – supporting local enterprises, market linkages and the district's trading strengths.
- Funding and incubation – building an endowment fund whose returns seed and incubate local ventures and community initiatives.
- Environment conservation – protecting the district's rivers, wetlands, forests and the Koshi Tappu ecosystem.

The Four Pillars

All Saptari Next activity is organised under four pillars.

1. Project

Concrete, time-bound interventions with defined outcomes – an energy installation, a business incubation cohort, a river-bank restoration. Projects are designed with partners, resourced through the campaign's networks and the endowment fund, and handed over to local owners when complete.

2. Program

Continuing streams of work that run across years – civic education, entrepreneurship support, environmental stewardship. Programs give the campaign continuity between projects and build lasting local capacity.

3. Poll

The campaign's listening pillar. Through surveys, public consultations and opinion research, Saptari Next gathers what the people of Saptari actually want, tests priorities, and feeds evidence into the design of projects and programs. Polls keep the campaign accountable to the district, not to any single interest.

4. Publication

The campaign's knowledge pillar. Saptari Next documents the district – its profile, data, history and possibilities – and publishes manuals, reports and studies so that every partner works from a shared, credible base of facts. This Manual is the first publication; the District Profile modules are its companion series.

Getting Involved

Saptari Next invites individuals and organisations to:

1. Join – register as a campaign supporter or partner organisation.

2. Contribute – offer expertise, data, funding or networks to a pillar or focus area.
3. Adopt – take ownership of a project or program in your community or sector.
4. Inform – participate in polls and consultations so the campaign reflects the district’s real priorities.

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Module 1: District Profile

Prepared from research compiled by the Saptari Next office (Module 1, district profiling series), verified and expanded against the National Population and Housing Census 2021 (CBS/NSO) and other published sources listed at the end of this module.

The District at a Glance

Indicator	Value
Province	Madhesh Province (easternmost district)
Headquarters	Rajbiraj
Area	1,363 km ² (63% Terai plains, 37% Chure)
Population (Census 2021)	706,255 – 14th of 77 districts
Population density	~518 per km ²
Annual growth (2011–21)	~1.0%
Sex ratio	1,010 females per 1,000 males
Urban share	62.5% live in urban municipalities
Literacy (5 years+)	67.7%
Main languages	Maithili (largest), Tharu, Urdu, Nepali
Religion	Hindu 88.5%, Muslim 9.6%, Buddhist 1.7%
Local governments	18 (9 urban + 9 rural municipalities)
Constituencies	4 federal, 8 provincial

Geography and Boundaries

Saptari is a fertile flatland district in Nepal’s eastern Terai, in Madhesh Province, covering 1,363 square kilometres at roughly 26°34’ N, 86°45’ E. Often called the “Heart of Mithila,” the district combines a rich agricultural economy, a tropical climate and biodiversity of national and global significance. Its headquarters, Rajbiraj, was Nepal’s first systematically planned township.

The district stretches east–west along the plains, with about 63% of its area in the Terai and 37% in the Chure (Siwalik) region; its north–south width averages about 23 km. Nearly 95% of the district lies in the lower tropical zone below 300 m elevation.

The district is bounded by:

- East – the Sapta Koshi River, which also forms the provincial boundary.
- West – the Balan River, separating Saptari from Siraha district.
- North – the hills of Udayapur district and the Mahabharat range.
- South – the Supaul and Madhubani districts of Bihar, India.

The open southern border with India shapes daily life: communities on both sides cross routinely for employment, healthcare, education and trade, and share kinship and cultural ties. The same geography brings shared hazards – monsoon flooding, waterlogging and disputes over cross-border embankments are recurring issues in Nepal–India border relations.

Rivers and Hydrology

Saptari is framed by major rivers on its eastern and western borders, with seasonal streams between them:

- Sapta Koshi – Nepal’s largest river system, formed of seven Himalayan tributaries (Sun Koshi, Indrawati, Bhote Koshi, Dudh Koshi, Arun, Tamur and Likhu). It carries massive sediment loads and dominates the region’s hydrology along the district’s eastern edge.
- Balan – a flashy river on the western border, rising in the Siwalik (Chure) hills.
- Khando – a 25 km Chure-origin river crossing the district, with a catchment of about 117 km²; highly prone to monsoon flash floods.
- Mahuli and Jita – smaller seasonal rivers from the Siwalik range that traverse the central district.

Hydrologically the district spans three zones: a steep, erosion-prone upper catchment in the Chure hills; a midstream belt where rivers shift channels and erode banks; and the flat downstream plains where slopes flatten, riverbeds rise with deposited sediment, and widespread inundation occurs. Flood-risk management is therefore a defining development challenge for Saptari.

Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve

The Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve lies in the Sapta Koshi floodplain across Saptari, Sunsari and Udayapur districts, at 75–81 m elevation. Established in 1976, it covers 348 km² with a 173 km² buffer zone, and in 1987 became Nepal’s first Ramsar site.

The reserve protects riparian wetlands, grasslands, marshes, forests and ponds. Flagship species include the globally threatened wild water buffalo (arna), the Gangetic dolphin, and endemic fish, alongside nilgai, smooth-coated otters and threatened turtles. It is one of Nepal’s Important Bird Areas, home to the swamp francolin, Baer’s pochard, Pallas’s fish eagle, greater spotted eagle, lesser adjutant and spot-billed pelican.

Around 215 settlements adjoin the wetland, depending on it for irrigation, grazing, fisheries and food. Major pressures include feral cattle grazing, flooding and siltation, wildlife-community conflict and illicit trade – making Koshi Tappu both a conservation treasure and a test of community-based stewardship.

Land Use and Agriculture

- Cultivated land – roughly 65% of the district, making Saptari one of the Terai’s granaries. Paddy, wheat and maize dominate, with a marked recent shift toward vegetable farming: Saptari ranks second among Terai districts for vegetable production, though productivity per hectare remains low – a clear improvement opportunity.
- Forest – about 15–16% (around 204 km²), concentrated in the northern Chure range and along the Koshi – low by national standards, which raises the stakes for conservation.

- Wetlands and fisheries – the district shares the globally significant Koshi wetland ecosystem, and its ponds and waters support a well-known fish-farming economy, including the government fish farming centre (Machha Palan Kendra).
- Mango belt – with Siraha and Dhanusha, Saptari lies in Nepal’s principal mango-producing region.

People and Society

Population. The Census 2021 counted 706,255 people (351,368 male; 354,887 female) in Saptari – Nepal’s 14th most populous district – growing at about 1.0% a year since 2011. About 62.5% live in the nine urban municipalities. The district is young: roughly 30% are under 15, 63% are of working age (15–64), and 7% are 65 or older.

Language and identity. Maithili is the largest mother tongue – exceeding 90% in Rajbiraj – followed by Tharu; Urdu and Nepali are spoken by smaller minorities, and bilingualism with Nepali is widespread. Madheshi communities form the largest population group (about a third of whom are Dalits), Tharus are the second largest – the highest Tharu share of any Madhesh district – and Muslims are nearly 10% of the population. By religion, 88.5% are Hindu, 9.6% Muslim and 1.7% Buddhist. This diversity, together with the district’s leading role in Maithili literature, is central to Saptari’s identity.

Migration. Foreign employment shapes household economies: in fiscal year 2021/22 Saptari accounted for roughly 11,000 new labour approvals (about 3% of the national total), with Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE the main destinations. Remittances are a vital income source – and the district’s diaspora is a key constituency for Saptari Next.

Education

Saptari’s literacy rate (5 years and above) is 67.7% – below the national average, with pronounced gender and community gaps that any development strategy must address. Higher education is anchored by Mahendra Bindeshwari Multiple Campus in Rajbiraj (Tribhuvan University-affiliated, offering law, management, humanities and education up to master’s level), National People College in Kanchanrup, and a growing number of +2 colleges across the district. Expanding quality, retention and technical education are priority gaps.

Health

The district’s referral hospital is Gajendra Narayan Singh Sagarmatha Zonal Hospital in Rajbiraj – a 125-bed facility receiving 200–250 outpatients daily, upgraded in recent years to provide specialist services in medicine, surgery, paediatrics, anaesthesia, ENT, orthopaedics, radiology and dentistry, along with X-ray and CT diagnostics. Persistent shortages of doctors and nursing staff, however, have repeatedly interrupted critical services, and many patients still travel to Biratnagar or Dharan for advanced care. Primary care is delivered through municipal health facilities across the eighteen local governments; cross-border use of Indian health services remains common in border communities.

Energy

Saptari has been an early testing ground for solar-powered irrigation in Nepal: the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPC) subsidised over a hundred solar irrigation pumps in the district between 2016 and 2019, and ICIMOD pilot systems from 2015 onward increased cropped areas by around 28–30% while sharply cutting diesel use and costs. Scaling decentralised solar – for irrigation, agro-processing and enterprise – alongside reliable grid supply is one of the campaign’s core energy opportunities.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

- Roads – the Mahendra (East–West) Highway crosses the district and the Postal (Hulaki) Highway serves its southern belt, linking Saptari east–west and toward border points.
- Air – Rajbiraj Airport reopened in May 2018 after eleven years, with a 1,500 m asphalt runway; services remain limited and intermittent.
- Border crossings – the Rajbiraj customs point (Kunauli) and associated sub-customs posts (see Economy below) connect the district to Bihar’s road network.

Administrative Structure

Saptari comprises eighteen local governments – nine urban municipalities and nine rural municipalities (populations from Census 2021):

Urban municipality	Pop. 2021	Rural municipality	Pop. 2021
Rajbiraj (district HQ)	70,803	Tilathi Koiladi	33,658
Kanchanrup	58,466	Rajgadh	32,462
Hanumannagar Kankalini	52,796	Agnisaira Krishnasavaran	31,634
Khadak	52,778	Mahadeva	30,315
Surunga	49,460	Chhinnamasta	29,946
Dakneshwori	47,739	Rupani	29,877
Bodebarsain	46,017	Bishnupur	27,703
Sambhunath	39,634	Tirhut	24,034
Saptakoshi	23,510	Balan–Bihul	23,527

These were consolidated from more than a hundred former Village Development Committees (VDCs) under the federal restructuring. The district elects 4 members to the federal House of Representatives and 8 to the Madhesh provincial assembly.

Economy and Cross-Border Trade

Agriculture is the mainstay. Agriculture and forestry provide livelihoods for roughly three-quarters of Madhesh Province’s population and about 40% of provincial GDP; services contribute around 47% and agro-based industry (jute, sugarcane, tobacco, grain processing) about 13%. Saptari is additionally known for fish farming, supported by the Koshi’s waters, and lies in Nepal’s principal mango belt alongside Siraha and Dhanusha. Remittances from foreign employment supplement farm incomes across the district.

Border trade. The Rajbiraj Customs Office in Tilathi Koiladi Rural Municipality anchors a minor Nepal–India crossing facing Kunauli Bazar in Supaul, Bihar, with functional sub-customs points at Belhi, Kushaha Pato and Gobindapur, and a further pedestrian crossing at Phulbariya–Inarwa toward Laukaha, Madhubani. Principal imports include clothing, motor parts, cosmetics and household goods.

Informal exchange. Much of the borderland economy runs beneath formal channels: daily shopping, healthcare, weddings and festivals routinely cross the border, drawn by price differences of 20% or more. Regulation of this everyday trade is a recurring source of friction between border communities and enforcement agencies.

Heritage of commerce. Hanumannagar – the district’s original headquarters – was historically a major trading town, settled by Marwari and Deshwali merchants and once among the largest towns in eastern Nepal on the India–Tibet trade route. This mercantile heritage is embedded in the district’s identity.

Vulnerability. Deep integration with the Indian economy is an asset in normal times but a structural exposure in crises: the 2015–16 border blockade and the disruptions of 2025 both hit Saptari’s supply lines hard. Trade facilitation, agro-processing and diversification are correspondingly high-value opportunities.

Culture, Religion and Tourism

Saptari is a heartland of Mithila culture and is regarded as the district with the strongest growth in Maithili literature. Its religious sites draw pilgrims from across Nepal and India:

- Chhinnamasta Bhagawati – one of the Shakti Peeths, about 10 km from Rajbiraj near the Indian border; a major draw during Dashain.
- Kankalini Temple – at Bhardaha in Hanumannagar Kankalini Municipality, an important Durga shrine with a rich founding legend.
- Shambhunath Temple – near the Mahendra Highway, famous for the Siruwa Mela in the month of Baisakh.

Religious tourism, Mithila art and the Koshi Tappu wetlands together form the core of a tourism economy that remains largely undeveloped. The district has also produced notable national figures – including playback singer Udit Narayan (from Bhardaha), Nepal’s first Vice President Parmanand Jha, Madhesi rights pioneer Gajendra Narayan Singh, and cricketer Mehboob Alam – a reminder of the talent the district exports.

Heritage: Rajbiraj, the Pink City

Rajbiraj was planned in the late 1930s as a miniature of Jaipur – hence “Pink City” – to re-settle Hanumannagar after devastating Koshi floods, and was declared a municipality in 1960, making it one of Nepal’s oldest planned towns. Its grid plan, shrines and cultural assets are a heritage of national significance. Recent proposals to drive a highway through the town’s core have met civic resistance, including a Supreme Court writ that stayed demolition; planners consulted by campaigners have favoured a ring-road alternative that preserves the historic townscape. For Saptari Next, Rajbiraj’s protection illustrates precisely why organised civic engagement matters.

Development Challenges and Opportunities

The profile above points to a consistent pattern. Saptari's challenges: flood and Chure degradation risk; literacy and health-staffing gaps; low agricultural productivity despite high output; heavy dependence on remittances and Indian supply chains; and under-developed tourism and industry. Its opportunities: a young, majority-urban population; fertile land with proven gains from solar irrigation; a strategic border-trade position; a globally significant wetland; a powerful cultural identity; and an engaged diaspora. Saptari Next's pillars – Project, Program, Poll and Publication – are designed to convert exactly these opportunities into the 2030–40–50 vision.

Sources and Notes

Key figures in this module are drawn from the National Population and Housing Census 2021 (CBS/National Statistics Office, including the Madhesh Province report and citypopulation.de tabulations); Nepal labour migration reporting for FY 2021/22; AEPC and ICIMOD documentation of solar irrigation in Saptari; reporting by the Kathmandu Post on Gajendra Narayan Singh Sagarmatha Zonal Hospital; and public reference material on the district's geography, temples and infrastructure. Land-use shares, forest cover and some sector figures are indicative and will be re-verified against official district statistics before the final print edition.

Roadmap and Next Steps

1. Publish this Manual and circulate it to prospective partners and local governments.
2. Complete the District Profile series – subsequent modules on demography, education, health, energy, and agriculture, with verified official data.
3. Run the first district-wide poll to test the 2030–40–50 vision milestones against citizens' priorities.
4. Establish the endowment fund framework and its first funding and incubation cohort.
5. Convene partners around the first flagship projects in energy, business promotion and conservation.

Acknowledgements

This Manual draws on district profiling research compiled by the Saptari Next office, including Module 1 prepared by campaign intern Bikash, expanded and verified against the Census 2021 and the published sources noted above. Errors and omissions are the campaign's own; corrections are welcome and will be incorporated in the next edition.

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