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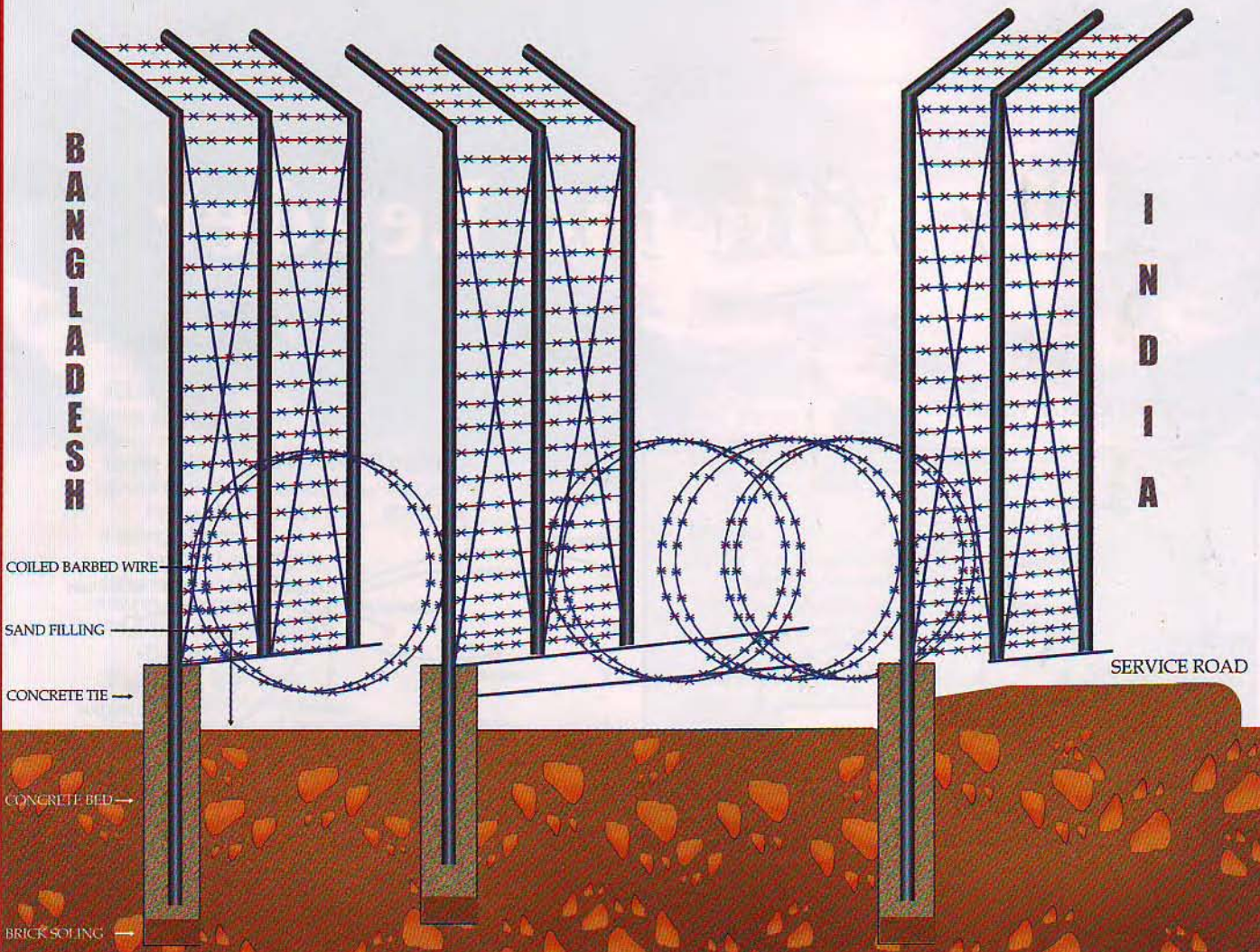
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Soft Borders

What is a border fence doing here? We thought we had been promised a new Southasia by SAARC.

Swapping Identities

Borderland exchanges along the Nepal-TAR frontier

by | Sara Shneiderman



For most Nepalis, the Chinese border town of Khasa is synonymous with the cheap clothes and electronics that eventually make their way down the Arniko Highway to Kathmandu. But for a growing number of people from the Nepali villages adjacent to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Khasa is the gateway to a set of opportunities that take advantage of China's positive discrimination policies towards minority groups and borderland populations. While northward migration has increased in recent years in response to Nepal's internal conflict, the Nepali, Tibetan and Chinese inhabitants of the area are also bound together by a rich history of crossborder economic and social relationships.

The town's three names - Khasa in Nepali, Dram in Tibetan, and Zhangmu in Chinese - attest to its multiple personalities. Located at the mouth of the steep gorge where the Bhote Khosi River exits the Tibetan plateau and enters the Himalayan midhills, the original settlement of Dram was a customs outpost where Tibetan officials registered Nepali traders en route to the trading centre of Nyalam, 30 km further north. Before the Chinese army established Dram as the official crossing on their newly built border road in 1960, the now-thriving town consisted of little more than a cluster of shacks. More important settlements in the area were the villages of Gosa, Lishing and Syolbugang.

Until 1960, the residents of Lishing and Syolbugang considered themselves Nepali citizens, an assumption reinforced by the visits of tax collectors representing the Nepali state. When Chinese officials arrived, they asked local leaders to

show them where the border was. One Lishing elder, now in his 80s, recalls: "We did not know what a border was or where it should be. We could not understand the language of the Chinese officials. They made us walk and walk and we just stopped when we got tired. That is where the border is now." Whether by accident or design, the villages of Lishing and Syolbugang ended up inside the TAR; in exchange, China granted Nepal the previously Tibetan villages of Lapchi and Lamabagar.

The Xiaerba

The residents of all four border villages were given a choice: either stay put and accept Chinese or Nepali citizenship by virtue of location, or move across the new border in order to maintain previously existing citizenship. Families often made mixed decisions and many are now split across the border, with some family members possessing Nepali *nagarikta* (citizenship) certificates and others Chinese identity cards. This situation proved traumatic during the Cultural Revolution in the late-1960s and early-1970s, when the border remained closed. With the liberalisation of the Chinese economy in the late-1980s, conditions have improved. The 1992 implementation of a Sino-Nepalese treaty, which allows citizens of either country who reside within 30 km of the border to cross freely without a passport or visa, has allowed many families to reunite. The provision has also proven an advantage to some families, who have been able to establish joint-venture businesses.

Despite the very real political boundary, most people in the area have complex identities shaped by the crossborder flows of language and culture. The term 'Sherpa', for example, used today by the inhabitants of Lishing and Syolbugang to describe themselves, has very different implications in Nepal and in the TAR. The Chinese government classifies the Sherpa (or Xiaerba) as a *dzu*, or 'less-developed ethnic people'. This classification falls short of the full status of *minzu*, or 'ethnic nationality', which defines larger Chinese minority groups such as Tibetans and Mongolians. The Sherpa do not qualify for *minzu* status, first, because their population is so small (approximately 1600, according to the most recent Chinese census); and second, because they have neither a distinctive writing script nor other cultural practices notably different from those of

mainstream Tibetans.

In Nepal, one would expect the Sherpa to establish an ethno-political organisation to agitate for incorporation into the higher status *minzu* group, but the Chinese state does not allow for such organisations. Anyway, as one Sherpa who teaches Chinese at the local middle school explains, "We are happy to remain in the *dzu* category because we get more positive attention from the government." Such attention includes educational and civil service quotas for *dzu* citizens; with such a small population, the competition is minimal. *Dzu* students also receive extended time to complete their exams and are graded on a more forgiving scale.

Perhaps most importantly, categorisation as *dzu* qualifies Lishing and Syolbugang's Sherpa community to receive support from Beijing's new fund for the development of borderland populations. According to a Lishing official, over the past two years the area has received over three-and-a-half million yuan (about USD 371,000), earmarked for infrastructure development, livestock improvement and income generation. The villages have been fully electrified and now have access to both reliable drinking water facilities and mobile phone services. When compared with the inferior living conditions of Sherpa and other ethnic groups immediately across the border in Nepal's Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha districts, it is little surprise that most 'Chinese Sherpa' feel certain that they or their parents made the right choice by accepting Chinese citizenship in 1960.

The big prize

Nonetheless, many Nepali citizens who were never presented with that decision have still been able to adopt alternative strategies to take advantage of China's rapid economic development and ethnic policies. After the 1992 Nepal-China treaty opened the border for locals, many Nepalis from the nearby villages of Marming and Tatopani relocated to Khasa. They opened businesses to import Nepali goods – mostly grain and ghee – into the TAR. "When I started, Tibetans depended on Nepali rice, flour and butter," explains Namkang, one of the first Nepali Sherpa to establish a successful business in Khasa. "The market was all ours and we profited enormously. But in the last decade, China has grown so much that now they can transport goods more cheaply from the mainland to Lhasa, so we are suffering." Nowadays, the more lucrative business goes in the other direction, forcing savvy businessmen like Namkang to reorient their trade and serve as middlemen in the transport of cheap Chinese goods to Kathmandu's markets.

Despite the diminishing profits, many Nepali border citizens still believe that the quality of life is

better on the TAR side. Nepalis from the border areas can work for up to one month in Dram or Nyalam without any formal registration, but for longer periods they need to register for a foreign resident permit. With a recommendation from a Chinese employer or landlord, this process can be quick. Authorities in Nyalam estimate that there are almost 400 Nepalis with foreign resident status in the county, and thousands more who come to work for less than a month at a time.

The biggest prize of all is to become a Chinese citizen, although the only sure way to do so is by marrying one. Many Nepalis, both male and female, have taken this route. There is another, back-door option, however: changing one's name to 'Sherpa' upon crossing the border and hoping to be mistaken for a Xiaerba. This is why members of other regional Nepali ethnic groups (such as the Thami and Tamang, found across the border in Nepal) are difficult to locate in Khasa – most introduce themselves as 'Sherpa'. Some go further by dressing in a 'traditional' style that few Sherpa themselves do, or by pretending that they do not understand Nepali.

But there are also those who seek to capitalise on their Nepali heritage. In Khasa and Nyalam, Nepali food is perceived to be cheap and healthy. To emphasise their Nepali-ness and draw customers, many eateries display photos of the Nepali royal family or play Nepali pop music. Ironically, these are precisely the symbols of dominant culture from which ethno-politically active Sherpa or Tamang inside Nepal seek to distance themselves.

Historically, links between frontier citizens were found not only in the Khasa area, but along the full length of the Tibetan-Nepali border from east to west. For instance, the most traveled trade route between the 12th and 17th centuries did not follow the modern road, but rather ran through Kyirong – what is now Rasuwa District on the Nepal side and Kyirong County in the TAR. Only relatively recently have crossborder relationships become centred around the road crossing. For now, the adaptations made by Nepal's borderland citizens – as the highway connects them to the TAR, the Chinese market and Beijing's economic and ethnic policies – are most evident in and around Khasa-Dram-Zhangmu. However, with several new road links under development between Nepal's northern regions and the TAR (notably through Rasuwa and Mustang districts) it is likely that old frontier relationships will be rejuvenated and similar adaptations will occur in these border regions as well. For now though, Khasa-Dram-Zhangmu remains the best developed site for the give-and-take between contemporary Nepali-Tibetan-Chinese identities. There are as many ways to define identity along this route as there are people crossing the border every day.

