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All Change at Rasuwa Garhi

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Research Report | All Change at Rasuwa Garhi

Sam Cowan

From time immemorial, pilgrims, traders, artisans, and religious teachers going to Lhasa from Kathmandu had to decide between two main routes. One roughly followed the line of the present road to Kodari, crossed the border where Friendship Bridge is built and followed a steep trail to Kuti (Tib. Nyalam). Loads were carried by porters up to this point but pack animals were used for the rest of the journey. The alternative route went north on the route that vehicles now use to get trekkers through Betrawati and Dhunche to Syabrubesi, the start point for the popular Langtang treks. From there it was a twenty-kilometer trail following the Bhote kosi to cross the border at Rasuwa Gadhi. It was a further twenty kilometers, following the river trail, to reach Kyirong in Tibet. Besides being a staging post for mule caravans, Kyirong, like Kuti, was also a busy trading post where Nepalese traders from the border areas brought rice to barter for Tibetan salt.

The detail and hazards of both routes can be read in the accounts of the journeys made by the Lhasa-based Newar merchants of Kathmandu known as the Lhasa traders (Tuladhar 2004). They spent long periods in Lhasa but merchandise had to be regularly transported to maintain the stock in the trading houses located round the Barkhor in Lhasa, and the decision on what route to take must often have been an agonizing one. The Kathmandu to Kyirong journey was completed in nine stages on trails that are described as long, narrow and hard. The Kathmandu to Kuti journey was done in ten days and, if anything, the accounts suggest the trail was even more hazardous. Kathmandu Newars also permanently resided in Kuti and

Kyirong to aid the transshipment of goods and to carry out major trading on their own account. Jest records that as late as 1959 there were forty five Newar households in Kyirong and forty in Kuti (Jest 1993).

The two routes were used for the invasion of Tibet in 1788 and 1791 by the forces of the recently formed Gorkha state under the direction of Bahadur Shah, which led to the plundering of Tashilhunpo monastery in Shigatse. The routes were also used by the Manchu armies when they launched their powerful counter offensive in 1792. When Jung Bahadur Rana launched his unprovoked war against Tibet in 1855, he divided his attacking forces between both routes, and built a fort at Rasuwa Gadhi as part of the preparation for the invasion.

In 1961 when the Chinese proposed the building of a road to connect Lhasa to Kathmandu, both the Kyirong and Kuti routes were given serious consideration. How one came to be selected rather than the other is an interesting tale well told by Rose (1971). On 25 September 1961, King Mahendra set off on 17-day state visit to China and Outer Mongolia. He had a well-earned reputation for skill in handling pressures from India and China, and turning them to his and Nepal's advantage. It is clear that throughout the visit he was on maximum alert to resist Chinese blandishments to say anything that would offend India. The stated purpose behind the visit to Peking was the signing of a boundary agreement but, totally unexpectedly, on the last day of the visit, an agreement to construct the road was signed. Though not discussed during the visit, the Chinese

presented a draft road agreement to Mahendra on the day before his departure and to quote directly from Rose, “in such terms as to imply that implementation of the treaty depended upon a favorable response to the road question. Having been badly outmaneuvered for once, the King was in no position to resist the pressure” (1971: 238-239).

Dr. Tulsi Giri, who was accompanying Mahendra, signed the agreement for Nepal, but this did not deflect Indian anger towards Mahendra. The Chinese were insistent on immediate implementation. Survey teams did their work in early 1962 and proposed two routes, one through Rasuwa Gadhi and the other through Kodari, with a strong preference for the former as it was shorter and traversed easier terrain. Possibly hoping to postpone the construction for as long as possible, Mahendra insisted on the Kodari route. Within a remarkably short time, work started and the road was completed in 1966.

A visit in March 2013 confirmed that the section of the road (now called the Araniko highway) from Kathmandu to Bahrabise is reasonably well maintained but the 26 kilometers up the steep sided gorge from Bahrabise to the border is in a bad state. It is essentially a compacted and rutted dirt track susceptible in a number of places to major landslides, a situation made worse by unrestricted stone quarrying above the road at various points. The Chinese have recently started work on a dry port on the Nepal side to ease the congestion caused by the present archaic system for the transshipment of goods from Khasa (Tib. Zhangmu) on their side through the Tatopani custom offices on the Nepal side. They have black topped the road to the border, cutting the journey time from Kuti to about an hour. Little wonder they are showing signs of frustration and despair about the state of the road on the Nepal side, a point well illustrated by what the Chinese ambassador was quoted as saying on 23 December 2012 when he laid the foundation stone for the new dry port. “As we are constructing a dry port on the Nepal-Tibet border we must repair the Araniko highway. Come up with a proposal. China is ready to help repair it” (Dangal 2012). Local traders are also quoted in the article as blaming the government for doing nothing to improve the road. Why Nepal is apparently dragging its feet can only be a matter of conjecture, but three days after the ambassador expressed his frustration on the issue, he attended a ceremony in Kathmandu at which a certificate was handed over to mark the completion of the Rasuwa Gadhi to Syabrubesi road, thus connecting Kyirong to Kathmandu exactly fifty years after China first proposed doing so. At a meeting held two days earlier, China had expressed

interest in upgrading Nepal-China transit points and constructing other necessary physical infrastructures to facilitate trade with Nepal (Bhandary 2012).

I first visited Rasuwa Gadhi in March 2006. Before doing so, I had read accounts by two of the first outsiders to visit the place: Tillman in 1949 (Tilman 1952) and Forbes in 1956 (Forbes 1962). In his inimitable way, Tilman describes his walk to the border through the Tibetan speaking village of Timure with “its row of five noble and ancient chortens” where “some land-hungry heathen had planted and fenced his maize so that the south-bound traveller must pass them, willy-nilly, on the unlucky side.” At Rasuwa Gadhi, “lying in the narrowest and deepest part of the gorge,” he found a few soldiers on the Nepal side but on the Tibetan side, apart from a stone slab inscribed with Chinese characters, “there was nothing, not even an empty sentry box, to denote one had crossed a frontier.” He pitched his tent “within a substantial stone fort, its walls embrasured for cannon and loopholed for rifles, and squeezed between the Trisuli river and one rock wall of the gorge” (1952: 53-54).

Forbes also commented on the Timure chortens and on the fact that there were some friendly Indian policemen manning a signal station in the village. Presumably this was one of seventeen such stations established across Nepal’s northern border by secret protocol in 1950. They stayed until Mahendra requested their removal in 1969. Forbes also found little sign of activity on the Tibetan side of the frontier but he did photograph the inscription on the stone slab and later had it translated. It was erected on November 26, 1792 and refers to the demarcation of the frontier after “the victory over the Gorkhas accomplished by General Fu, the Great General for the Pacification of the West”. Forbes also gives a translation by Sir Charles Bell of the inscription on a famous pillar in Lhasa which describes in great detail and colorful language the victories by the Manchu armies “in the land of thieves” where they “traversed the mountains, so difficult to pass through, as though they were moving over a level plain and crossed rivers with great waves and narrow gorges as though they were small streams” (1962: 126-130).

In 2006 I found that apart from a new footbridge, a two-storey building on the Tibet side and two small huts on the Nepal side, very little had changed since Tilman and Forbes had visited. It was delightfully tranquil. The chortens in Timure were still as impressive as ever and the walls of Jung Bahadur’s fort were well preserved. A prominent notice in Nepali and English close to the fort helpfully summed up the historic importance of the place:



Figure 1: The river junction at Rasuwa Garhi in 2006. From the right, the Lende Khola joins the Bhote Kosi which flows down the valley from Kyirong. A footbridge leads to the buildings across the frontier.

(Sam Cowan 2006)



Figure 2: The river junction in 2013. Behind the temporary military-style bridge are the concrete supports for the new fly-over bridge. The five-storey structure was built recently and extensive building work is still going on.

(Sam Cowan 2013)

Rasuwa Fort was a major gateway for the traders of Nepal and Tibet since the ancient time. It had remained a major passway and center for them up to the middle age (17th Century). The fort was built on the bank where two rivers, the Lingde River in the north and Kerung in the west, merge to form Bhotekoshi. It is said that, at the time of the war between Nepal and Tibet, during period of Bahadur Shah, the Chinese army marched across this passway to support the Tibetan army and pushed the Nepali army to Betrawati. Later at the time of the war between Nepal and Tibet, during period of Junga Bahadur Rana, the Nepali army reached Kerung and Digarwa across this pathway. Rasuwa Fort was built during this war period in 1912 Bikram era. (Notice on Rasuwa Fort in 2006)

Just one historical detail is wrong. “The Chinese army” in 1792 did not simply “march across this passway.” Rasuwa Gadhi was the scene of a ferocious three day battle which yielded a victory that was much acclaimed in Chinese sources as an outstanding feat of arms. It was the first battle on Nepal territory of the powerful Manchu counter offensive launched in response to the invasion of 1791. The Gorkhas had sensibly destroyed the bridge over the Lende River and the setting in the steep and narrow gorge greatly favored defenders, leaving attacking forces with little scope to maneuver. The Manchu forces were commanded by two very gifted and highly experienced commanders, Generals Fukangan and Hailancha. The three regiments commanded by Fukangan managed to throw a bridge across the river and seized the checkpoint while two regiments under Hailancha secretly crossed the river upstream on rafts, skirted the mountains and managed to emerge above the enemy camp to combine with Fukanga’s regiments to rout the Gorkha forces (Boulnois 1989).

I returned to Rasuwa Gadhi in March 2013. The new road from Syabrubesi is very impressive. It was built entirely by Chinese labor using their own trucks and road building equipment. It is not yet black topped, but the strong foundations are in place to make that a straightforward task. The nine concrete bridges are clearly built to carry the heaviest loads and the safety barriers stand out as unusual compared with other roads in Nepal where such considerations are given a low priority.

The road runs by the river just below the village of Timure. The chortens are therefore untouched but the village is becoming a sprawl so characteristic of other areas of Nepal where new roads are being established. Well before the

road was completed, press reports carried stories of locals seeing short term advantages such as shortening the time to get to Syabrubesi but expressing concern about the long term consequences: “All the land is being bought up by people from Trisuli and further south. Soon, the whole village will be owned by them, and we’ll have to resort to collecting firewood and fodder for money. The poor will just get poorer” (Sthapit 2011). There was also a large police presence in the village and endless checkpoints along the road. The charming hamlet of Gadhi, just 500m from the border, was unchanged, saved by having no space to build anything.

Inevitably the area around Rasuwa Gadhi had changed dramatically and the contrast between the two sides of the frontier was stark. On one side a new large and very impressive five-storey building; on the other, one new bungalow-style building and a ramshackle collection of huts. Most of the outer walls of the fort still stood but the definition of the fort away from the river had been lost. The Chinese have built a temporary military-style bridge to facilitate the vehicles and equipment necessary to build the road. Part of the walls of the fort near the river had been demolished to accommodate the road that runs over this bridge but this could be restored when the main flyover-style bridge is completed. The anchored retaining wall on the Chinese side and two large concrete central supports for this are already in place and, depending on how and where the anchored retaining wall on the Nepali side is built, it is possible that the bridge will go over the walls of the fort and therefore leave one of its most striking features untouched. However, on 10 July 2013 an article in *Republica*, five months after my visit, reported that four meters of the fort’s wall had already fallen down and cracks had developed along the length of the wall due to the use of heavy equipment and rampant extraction of gravel and soil for the ongoing construction of the bridge (Poudel 2013). The report also asserted that the local administration was trying “to fudge the issue” and that the Department of Archeology had initially objected to the bridge but gave conditional approval to construct it at least a foot above the fort, and in such a manner that it would not have any impact on the structure. It is hard to see such understandable concerns carrying much weight in the final analysis given the very high political profile of the project.

I searched but could not find the board which gave the history of the place. Perhaps a new one is being made. If so, I hope it is based, like its predecessor, on simple historical fact uninfluenced by contemporary political sensitivities.

There is no doubting China's commitment to making this second road crossing with Nepal a significant one in further boosting Chinese exports to Nepal. The railway from Lhasa to Shigatse will be completed this year and the next extension will be to Kyirong, where China is already spending large sums of money to turn it into a major business hub by upgrading its infrastructure (Basnet 2013). As it is, the trade imbalance is already starkly unequal. According to statistics compiled by the Trade and Export Promotion Centre, Nepal exported goods worth 1.21 billion Rupees to China and imported goods worth 30.59 billion Rupees from China in the first five months of the current fiscal year (Republica 2013).

The figure for imports is almost certainly a gross underestimate because, as with most imports into Nepal, there is massive under-invoicing of goods entering Nepal at the Khasa/Tatopani border crossing with the connivance of officials on both sides. Significant imports from China, as with all countries except India, must be paid for through a dollar denominated Letter of Credit. However, to avoid customs duties, VAT and allied taxes, imports are invoiced at lower value and the balance is paid through informal channels, based entirely on trust, known as *hundi* (Kathmandu Post 2013). This is done, in a highly complex operation, mainly using remittance money converted into US dollars being channeled through Hong Kong from where it finds its way to the Chinese traders who have exported the goods to Nepal in the first place (Kathmandu banker, pers. comm. 2013).

A formidable civil engineering challenge stands in the way of maximizing the use of the new road. The first five kilometers out of Syabrubesi has recently been black topped but the remaining ten kilometers to Dhunche, through the villages of Mulkharka, Ramche and Gadkhola, traverses one of the most landslide-prone areas in Nepal. Each monsoon season, the Kathmandu media regularly reports the cutting off of the existing road for days and sometimes weeks on end. Crossing the area in a vehicle at any time is slow and tortuous. Numerous geological reports spell out why this is so. The area is very close to the Main Central Thrust [MCT] of the Himalaya. This is the weak junction where the Indian plate slid under the Asian plate causing the Indian plate to shatter and crush. To quote one report, "it is one of the most tectonically significant structures in the Himalayan orogen. Detailed geologic mapping and structural analysis of the MCT in the Langtang National Park region of central Nepal reveals that this segment of the fault zone experienced multiple episodes of south-directed movement, under both brittle and ductile conditions, during the Tertiary

period" (MacFarlane et al. 1992). To see what this means in practice today, go on YouTube to see any of the many video clips that numerous trekkers have uploaded to share the excitement of crossing the land-slide affected areas. Road repair and road building, and the continual vibration of the land caused by heavy traffic movement, as well as monsoon rainfall, add to the general instability of the soil in the area.

No doubt, with massive Chinese investment some improvement could be achieved, but it raises the question of why China is currently spending so much on improving Nepal's infrastructure. Numerous politicians, bureaucrats and commentators in Kathmandu are constantly stressing the advantages which will open to Nepal if it can become the transit bridge of choice for trade between China and India. In my view, realizing such a prospect is a very long way off. Nepal would need to make massive improvements in its internal road transport network and in its merchandise and service handling capabilities to compete with the quantity and relative ease with which transshipments currently take place through the port of Calcutta. The reason for the ramping up of investment is based more on China's priorities than Nepal's. China wants to weaken India's dominance in Nepali affairs and to strengthen its own influence but it recognizes that the weight of history, culture, religion and language works against achieving this objective. It sees making Nepal, including ordinary consumers, increasingly dependent on its goods and investment as the surest way to give it greater strategic weight to press its concerns on the Government of Nepal on all issues, and particularly on Tibetan affairs (anonymous contact, pers. comm. 2013). The new road from Kyirong through the historic crossing point of Rasuwa Gadhi will certainly play its part in that; and China clearly wants quick action. A high priced delegation arrived in Kathmandu on 31 March 2013 with the declared aim of seeking ways of expanding cooperation with Nepal. On the agenda was a request to the Nepal government "to speed up infrastructure construction at the Nepal-China border in Kerung-Rasuwa" (Ekantipur 2013).

What all this portends for Nepal was made clear in an article in the *Nepali Times* of 31 May 2013 which claimed that: "Chinese exports to Nepal have exploded in the past ten years. Affordable Chinese apparel have transformed the way Nepalis dress, and Chinese electronic goods and vehicles have flooded the market" (Kumar 2013). The same article noted that China is also upgrading the border facilities at Rasuwa Gadhi, "anticipating that most trade will move there once the highway on the Nepali side is

complete and the Chinese railway network arrives in Kerung via Xigatse.” All too clearly, there is much more of this “flooding the market” to come. The same issue carried an interview with Wu Chuntai, China’s ambassador to Nepal, under a heading of a quote from him that: “It is a win-win-win situation.” However, his answer to the question of what prospects he saw for balancing Nepal-China trade is notably thin on substantive detail (Interview 2013).

Keywords: China, Nepal, Rasuwa, border, roads, trade.

Endnotes

1. Personal information in this paragraph from a senior banker in Kathmandu March 2013.
2. See, for example, covering just one section of the many landslide-prone parts of the road: “Landslide when Trekking in Langtang Valley Trekking”, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIDDPu9pyNc.
3. Insight shared by trusted contact who has interacted with senior Chinese officials. Kathmandu, March 2013.

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Sam Cowan is a retired British general who knows Nepal well through his British Gurkha connections. He trekked extensively in east and west Nepal during his service, including during the Maoist conflict. Since his retirement eleven years ago, he has trekked at length through most of the Tibetan-speaking lands on Nepal’s northern border. He has written about the Maoist conflict, including an article: “Inside the People’s Liberation Army: a Military Perspective,” published in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, Number 37, 2011 and in *Revolution in Nepal: An Anthropological and Historical Approach to the People’s War* (OUP Delhi, 2013).

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